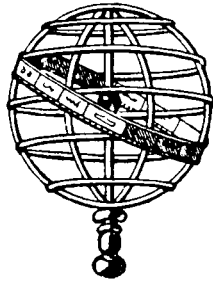


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BY

WILKIE COLLINS,

AUTHOR OF "THE WOMAN IN WHITE," "THE DEAD SECRET,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE FOURTH SCENE

(Continued).

THE FOURTH SCENE

(*Continued*).



CHAPTER XII.

TOWARDS three o'clock in the afternoon, Captain Wragge stopped at the nearest station to Ossory which the railway passed in its course through Essex. Inquiries made on the spot, informed him that he might drive to St. Crux, remain there for a quarter of an hour, and return to the station in time for an evening train to London. In ten minutes more, the captain was on the road again, driving rapidly in the direction of the coast.

After proceeding some miles on the highway, the carriage turned off, and the coachman involved himself in an intricate network of cross-roads.

"Are we far from St. Crux?" asked the captain, growing impatient, after mile on mile had been passed, without a sign of reaching the journey's end.

"You'll see the house, sir, at the next turn in the road," said the man.

The next turn in the road brought them within view of the open country again. Ahead of the carriage, Captain Wragge saw a long dark line against the sky

—the line of the sea wall which protects the low coast of Essex from inundation. The flat intermediate country was intersected by a labyrinth of tidal streams, winding up from the invisible sea in strange fantastic curves—rivers at high water, and channels of mud at low. On his right hand, was a quaint little village, mostly composed of wooden houses, straggling down to the brink of one of the tidal streams. On his left hand, farther away, rose the gloomy ruins of an Abbey, with a desolate pile of buildings, which covered two sides of a square, attached to it. One of the streams from the sea (called in Essex, “backwaters”) curled almost entirely round the house. Another, from an opposite quarter, appeared to run straight through the grounds, and to separate one side of the shapeless mass of buildings, which was in moderate repair, from another, which was little better than a ruin. Bridges of wood, and bridges of brick, crossed the stream, and gave access to the house from all points of the compass. No human creature appeared in the neighbourhood, and no sound was heard but the hoarse barking of a house-dog from an invisible court-yard.

“Which door shall I drive to, sir?” asked the coachman. “The front, or the back?”

“The back,” said Captain Wragge, feeling that the less notice he attracted in his present position, the safer that position might be.

The carriage twice crossed the stream before the coachman made his way through the grounds into a dreary enclosure of stone. At an open door on the

inhabited side of the place, sat a weather-beaten old man, busily at work on a half-finished model of a ship. He rose and came to the carriage door, lifting up his spectacles on his forehead, and looking disconcerted at the appearance of a stranger.

"Is Mr. Noel Vanstone staying here?" asked Captain Wragge.

"Yes, sir," replied the old man. "Mr. Noel came yesterday."

"Take that card to Mr. Vanstone, if you please," said the captain; "and say I am waiting here to see him."

In a few minutes, Noel Vanstone made his appearance, breathless and eager; absorbed in anxiety for news from Aldborough. Captain Wragge opened the carriage-door, seized his out-stretched hand, and pulled him in without ceremony.

"Your housekeeper has gone," whispered the captain, "and you are to be married on Monday. Don't agitate yourself, and don't express your feelings—there isn't time for it. Get the first active servant you can find in the house, to pack your bag in ten minutes—take leave of the admiral—and come back at once with me to the London train."

Noel Vanstone faintly attempted to ask a question. The captain declined to hear it.

"As much talk as you like on the road," he said. "Time is too precious for talking here. How do we know Lecount may not think better of it? How do we know she may not turn back, before she gets to Zurich?"

That startling consideration terrified Noel Vanstone into instant submission.

"What shall I say to the admiral?" he asked helplessly.

"Tell him you are going to be married, to be sure! What does it matter, now Lecount's back is turned? If he wonders you didn't tell him before, say it's a runaway match, and the bride is waiting for you. Stop! Any letters addressed to you, in your absence, will be sent to this place, of course? Give the admiral these envelopes, and tell him to forward your letters under cover to me. I am an old customer at the hotel we are going to; and if we find the place full, the landlord may be depended on to take care of any letters with my name on them. A safe address in London for your correspondence, may be of the greatest importance. How do we know Lecount may not write to you on her way to Zurich?"

"What a head you have got!" cried Noel Vanstone, eagerly taking the envelopes. "You think of everything."

He left the carriage in high excitement, and ran back into the house. In ten minutes more Captain Wragge had him in safe custody, and the horses started on their return journey.

The travellers reached London in good time that evening, and found accommodation at the hotel.

Knowing the restless, inquisitive nature of the man he had to deal with, Captain Wragge had anticipated some little difficulty and embarrassment in meeting the

questions which Noel Vanstone might put to him on the way to London. To his great relief, a startling domestic discovery absorbed his travelling companion's whole attention at the outset of the journey. By some extraordinary oversight, Miss Bygrave had been left, on the eve of her marriage, unprovided with a maid. Noel Vanstone declared that he would take the whole responsibility of correcting this deficiency in the arrangements, on his own shoulders; he would not trouble Mr. Bygrave to give him any assistance; he would confer, when they got to their journey's end, with the landlady of the hotel, and would examine the candidates for the vacant office himself. All the way to London, he returned again and again to the same subject; all the evening, at the hotel, he was in and out of the landlady's sitting-room, until he fairly obliged her to lock the door. In every other proceeding which related to his marriage, he had been kept in the background; he had been compelled to follow in the footsteps of his ingenious friend. In the matter of the lady's maid he claimed his fitting position at last—he followed nobody; he took the lead!

The forenoon of the next day was devoted to obtaining the licence—the personal distinction of making the declaration on oath being eagerly accepted by Noel Vanstone, who swore, in perfect good faith (on information previously obtained from the captain) that the lady was of age. The document procured, the bridegroom returned to examine the characters and qualifications of the women-servants out of the place, whom

the landlady had engaged to summon to the hotel—while Captain Wragge turned his steps, “on business personal to himself,” towards the residence of a friend in a distant quarter of London.

The captain’s friend was connected with the law, and the captain’s business was of a twofold nature. His first object was to inform himself of the legal bearings of the approaching marriage on the future of the husband and the wife. His second object was to provide, beforehand, for destroying all traces of the destination to which he might betake himself, when he left Aldborough on the wedding-day. Having reached his end successfully, in both these cases, he returned to the hotel, and found Noel Vanstone nursing his offended dignity in the landlady’s sitting-room. Three ladies’-maids had appeared to pass their examination, and had all, on coming to the question of wages impudently declined accepting the place. A fourth candidate was expected to present herself on the next day; and, until she made her appearance, Noel Vanstone positively declined removing from the metropolis. Captain Wragge showed his annoyance openly at the unnecessary delay thus occasioned in the return to Aldborough, but without producing any effect. Noel Vanstone shook his obstinate little head, and solemnly refused to trifle with his responsibilities.

The first event which occurred on Saturday morning, was the arrival of Mrs. Lecount’s letter to her master, enclosed in one of the envelopes which the captain had addressed to himself. He received it (by previous

arrangement with the waiter) in his bedroom—read it with the closest attention—and put it away carefully in his pocket-book. The letter was ominous of serious events to come, when the housekeeper returned to England ; and it was due to Magdalen—who was the person threatened—to place the warning of danger in her own possession.

Later in the day, the fourth candidate appeared for the maid's situation—a young woman of small expectations and subdued manners, who looked (as the landlady remarked) like a person overtaken by misfortune. She passed the ordeal of examination successfully, and accepted the wages offered without a murmur. The engagement having been ratified on both sides, fresh delays ensued, of which Noel Vanstone was once more the cause. He had not yet made up his mind whether he would, or would not, give more than a guinea for the wedding-ring ; and he wasted the rest of the day to such disastrous purpose in one jeweller's shop after another, that he and the captain, and the new lady's-maid (who travelled with them), were barely in time to catch the last train from London that evening.

It was late at night when they left the railway at the nearest station to Aldborough. Captain Wragge had been strangely silent all through the journey. His mind was ill at ease. He had left Magdalen, under very critical circumstances, with no fit person to control her ; and he was wholly ignorant of the progress of events, in his absence, at North Shingles.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT had happened at Aldborough, in Captain Wragge's absence?

Events had occurred which the captain's utmost dexterity might have found it hard to remedy.

As soon as the chaise had left North Shingles, Mrs. Wragge received the message which her husband had charged the servant to deliver. She hastened into the parlour, bewildered by her stormy interview with the captain, and penitently conscious that she had done wrong, without knowing what the wrong was. If Magdalen's mind had been unoccupied by the one idea of the marriage which now filled it—if she had possessed composure enough to listen to Mrs. Wragge's rambling narrative of what had happened during her interview with the housekeeper—Mrs. Lecount's visit to the wardrobe must, sooner or later, have formed part of the disclosure; and Magdalen, although she might never have guessed the truth, must at least have been warned that there was some element of danger lurking treacherously in the Alpaca dress. As it was, no such consequence as this followed Mrs. Wragge's appearance in the parlour; for no such consequence was now possible.

Events which had happened earlier in the morning, events which had happened for days and weeks past, had vanished as completely from Magdalen's mind, as if they had never taken place. The horror of the coming Monday—the merciless certainty implied in the appointment of the day and hour—petrified all feeling in her, and annihilated all thought. Mrs. Wragge made three separate attempts to enter on the subject of the housekeeper's visit. The first time she might as well have addressed herself to the wind, or to the sea. The second attempt seemed likely to be more successful. Magdalen sighed, listened for a moment indifferently, and then dismissed the subject. "It doesn't matter," she said. "The end has come all the same. I'm not angry with you. Say no more." Later in the day, from not knowing what else to talk about, Mrs. Wragge tried again. This time, Magdalen turned on her impatiently. "For God's sake, don't worry me about trifles! I can't bear it." Mrs. Wragge closed her lips on the spot, and returned to the subject no more. Magdalen, who had been kind to her at all other times, had angrily forbidden it. The captain—utterly ignorant of Mrs. Lecount's interest in the secrets of the wardrobe—had never so much as approached it. All the information that he had extracted from his wife's mental confusion, he had extracted by putting direct questions, derived purely from the resources of his own knowledge. He had insisted on plain answers, without excuses of any kind; he had carried his point as usual; and his departure the same morning had left

him no chance of re-opening the question, even if his irritation against his wife had permitted him to do so. There the Alpaca dress hung, neglected in the dark ; the unnoticed, unsuspected centre of dangers that were still to come.

Towards the afternoon, Mrs. Wragge took courage to start a suggestion of her own—she pleaded for a little turn in the fresh air.

Magdalen passively put on her hat ; passively accompanied her companion along the public walk, until they reached its northward extremity. Here the beach was left solitary, and here they sat down, side by side, on the shingle. It was a bright exhilarating day ; pleasure-boats were sailing on the calm blue water ; Aldborough was idling happily afloat and ashore. Mrs. Wragge recovered her spirits in the gaiety of the prospect—she amused herself, like a child, by tossing pebbles into the sea. From time to time she stole a questioning glance at Magdalen, and saw no encouragement in her manner, no change to cordiality in her face. She sat silent on the slope of the shingle, with her elbow on her knee, and her head resting on her hand, looking out over the sea—looking with rapt attention, and yet with eyes that seemed to notice nothing. Mrs. Wragge wearied of the pebbles, and lost her interest in looking at the pleasure-boats. Her great head began to nod heavily, and she dozed in the warm drowsy air. When she woke, the pleasure-boats were far off ; their sails were white specks in the distance. The idlers on the beach were thinned in

number ; the sun was low in the heaven ; the blue sea was darker, and rippled by a breeze. Changes on sky and earth and ocean told of the waning day ; change was everywhere—except close at her side. There Magdalen sat, in the same position, with weary eyes that still looked over the sea, and still saw nothing.

“ Oh, do speak to me !” said Mrs. Wragge.

Magdalen started, and looked about her vacantly.

“ It’s late,” she said, shivering under the first sensation that reached her of the rising breeze. “ Come home ; you want your tea.”

They walked home in silence.

“ Don’t be angry with me for asking,” said Mrs. Wragge, as they sat together at the tea-table. “ Are you troubled, my dear, in your mind ?”

“ Yes,” replied Magdalen. “ Don’t notice me. My trouble will soon be over.”

She waited patiently until Mrs. Wragge had made an end of the meal, and then went up-stairs to her own room.

“ Monday !” she said, as she sat down at her toilette-table. “ Something may happen before Monday comes !”

Her fingers wandered mechanically among the brushes and combs, the tiny bottles and cases placed on the table. She set them in order, now in one way, and now in another—then on a sudden pushed them away from her in a heap. For a minute or two her hands remained idle. That interval passed, they grew restless

again, and pulled the two little drawers backwards and forwards in their grooves. Among the objects laid in one of them was a Prayer-Book, which had belonged to her at Combe-Raven, and which she had saved with her other relics of the past, when she and her sister had taken their farewell of home. She opened the Prayer-Book after a long hesitation, at the Marriage Service—shut it again, before she had read a line—and put it back hurriedly in one of the drawers. After turning the key in the locks, he rose and walked to the window.

“The horrible sea!” she said, turning from it with a shudder of disgust. “The lonely, dreary, horrible sea!”

She went back to the drawer, and took the Prayer-Book out for the second time; half opened it again at the Marriage Service; and impatiently threw it back into the drawer. This time, after turning the lock, she took the key away—walked with it in her hand to the open window—and threw it violently from her into the garden. It fell on a bed thickly planted with flowers. It was invisible; it was lost. The sense of its loss seemed to relieve her.

“Something may happen on Friday; something may happen on Saturday; something may happen on Sunday. Three days still!”

She closed the green shutters outside the window, and drew the curtains, to darken the room still more. Her head felt heavy; her eyes were burning hot. She threw herself on her bed, with a sullen impulse to sleep away the time.

The quiet of the house helped her, the darkness of the room helped her ; the stupor of mind into which she had fallen had its effect on her senses : she dropped into a broken sleep. Her restless hands moved incessantly ; her head tossed from side to side of the pillow—but still she slept. Erelong, words fell by ones and twos from her lips ; words whispered in her sleep, growing more and more continuous, more and more articulate, the longer the sleep lasted ; words which seemed to calm her restlessness, and to hush her into deeper repose. She smiled ; she was in the happy land of dreams—Frank's name escaped her. “Do you love me, Frank?” she whispered. “Oh, my darling, say it again ! say it again !”

The time passed, the room grew darker ; and still she slumbered and dreamed. Towards sunset—without any noise inside the house or out to account for it—she started up on the bed, awake again in an instant. The drowsy obscurity of the room struck her with terror. She ran to the window, pushed open the shutters, and leaned far out into the evening air and the evening light. Her eyes devoured the trivial sights on the beach ; her ears drank in the welcome murmur of the sea. Anything to deliver her from the waking impression which her dreams had left ! No more darkness ; no more repose. Sleep that came mercifully to others, came treacherously to her. Sleep had only closed her eyes on the future, to open them on the past.

She went down again into the parlour, eager to

talk—no matter how idly, no matter on what trifles. The room was empty. Perhaps Mrs. Wragge had gone to her work—perhaps, she was too tired to talk. Magdalen took her hat from the table, and went out. The sea that she had shrunk from, a few hours since, looked friendly now. How lovely it was in its cool evening blue! What a godlike joy in the happy multitude of waves, leaping up to the light of Heaven!

She stayed out, until the night fell and the stars appeared. The night steadied her.

By slow degrees, her mind recovered its balance, and she looked her position unflinchingly in the face. The vain hope that accident might defeat the very end for which, of her own free will, she had ceaselessly plotted and toiled, vanished and left her; self-dissipated in its own weakness. She knew the true alternative, and faced it. On one side, was the revolting ordeal of the marriage—on the other, the abandonment of her purpose. Was it too late to choose between the sacrifice of the purpose, and the sacrifice of herself? Yes! too late. The backward path had closed behind her. Time that no wish could change, Time that no prayers could recall, had made her purpose a part of herself: once she had governed it; now it governed her. The more she shrank, the harder she struggled, the more mercilessly it drove her on. No other feeling in her was strong enough to master it—not even the horror that was maddening her; the horror of her marriage.

Towards nine o'clock, she went back to the house.

“Walking again!” said Mrs. Wragge, meeting her at the door. “Come in and sit down, my dear. How tired you must be!”

Magdalen smiled, and patted Mrs. Wragge kindly on the shoulder.

“You forget how strong I am,” she said. “Nothing hurts me.”

She lit her candle, and went up-stairs again into her room. As she returned to the old place by her toilette table, the vain hope in the three days of delay, the vain hope of deliverance by accident, came back to her—this time, in a form more tangible than the form which it had hitherto worn.

“Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Something may happen to him; something may happen to me. Something serious; something fatal. One of us may die.”

A sudden change came over her face. She shivered, though there was no cold in the air. She started, though there was no noise to alarm her.

“One of us may die. I may be the one.”

She fell into deep thought—roused herself, after a while—and, opening the door, called to Mrs. Wragge to come and speak to her.

“You were right in thinking I should fatigue myself,” she said. “My walk has been a little too much for me. I feel tired; and I am going to bed. Good-night.” She kissed Mrs. Wragge, and softly closed the door again.

After a few turns backwards and forwards in the room, she abruptly opened her writing-case and began

a letter to her sister. The letter grew and grew under her hands ; she filled sheet after sheet of note-paper. Her heart was full of her subject : it was her own story addressed to Norah. She shed no tears ; she was composed to a quiet sadness. Her pen ran smoothly on. After writing for more than two hours, she left off while the letter was still unfinished. There was no signature attached to it—there was a blank space reserved, to be filled up at some other time. After putting away the case, with the sheets of writing secured inside it, she walked to the window for air, and stood there looking out.

The moon was waning over the sea. The breeze of the earlier hours had died out. On earth and ocean, the spirit of the Night brooded in a deep and awful calm.

Her head drooped low on her bosom, and all the view waned before her eyes with the waning moon. She saw no sea, no sky. Death the Tempter, was busy at her heart. Death the Tempter, pointed homeward, to the grave of her dead parents in Combe-Raven churchyard.

“Nineteen last birthday,” she thought. “Only nineteen!” She moved away from the window—hesitated—and then looked out again at the view. “The beautiful night!” she said gratefully. “Oh, the beautiful night!”

She left the window, and lay down on her bed. Sleep that had come treacherously before, came mercifully now ; came deep and dreamless, the image of her last waking thought—the image of Death.

Early the next morning, Mrs. Wragge went into Magdalen's room, and found that she had risen betimes. She was sitting before the glass, drawing the comb slowly through and through her hair—thoughtful and quiet.

“How do you feel this morning, my dear?” asked Mrs. Wragge. “Quite well again?”

“Yes.”

After replying in the affirmative, she stopped, considered for a moment, and suddenly contradicted herself. “No,” she said, “not quite well. I am suffering a little from toothache.” As she altered her first answer in those words, she gave a twist to her hair with the comb, so that it fell forward and hid her face.

At breakfast she was very silent; and she took nothing but a cup of tea.

“Let me go to the chemist's and get something,” said Mrs. Wragge.

“No, thank you.”

“Do let me!”

“No!”

She refused for the second time sharply and angrily. As usual, Mrs. Wragge submitted, and let her have her own way. When breakfast was over she rose, without a word of explanation, and went out. Mrs. Wragge watched her from the window, and saw that she took the direction of the chemist's shop.

On reaching the chemist's door, she stopped—paused, before entering the shop, and looked in at the window—hesitated, and walked away a little—hesi-

tated again—and took the first turning which led back to the beach.

Without looking about her, without caring what place she chose, she seated herself on the shingle. The only persons who were near to her, in the position she now occupied, were a nursemaid and two little boys. The youngest of the two had a tiny toy-ship in his hand. After looking at Magdalen for a little while, with the quaintest gravity and attention, the boy suddenly approached her; and opened the way to an acquaintance by putting his toy composedly on her lap.

“Look at my ship,” said the child, crossing his hands on Magdalen’s knee.

She was not usually patient with children. In happier days, she would not have met the boy’s advance towards her, as she met it now. The hard despair in her eyes left them suddenly; her fast-closed lips parted, and trembled. She put the ship back into the child’s hands, and lifted him on her lap.

“Will you give me a kiss?” she said, faintly.

The boy looked at his ship, as if he would rather have kissed the ship.

She repeated the question—repeated it, almost humbly. The child put his hand up to her neck, and kissed her.

“If I was your sister, would you love me?”

All the misery of her friendless position, all the wasted tenderness of her heart, poured from her in those words.

"Would you love me?" she repeated, hiding her face on the bosom of the child's frock.

"Yes," said the boy. "Look at my ship."

She looked at the ship through her gathering tears.

"What do you call it?" she asked, trying hard to find her way even to the interest of a child.

"I call it Uncle Kirke's ship," said the boy. "Uncle Kirke has gone away."

The name recalled nothing to her memory. No remembrances but old remembrances lived in her now. "Gone?" she repeated absently, thinking what she should say to her little friend next.

"Yes," said the boy. "Gone to China."

Even from the lips of a child, that word struck her to the heart. She put Kirke's little nephew off her lap, and instantly left the beach.

As she turned back to the house, the struggle of the past night renewed itself in her mind. But the sense of relief which the child had brought to her, the reviving tenderness which she had felt while he sat on her knee, influenced her still. She was conscious of a dawning hope, opening freshly on her thoughts, as the boy's innocent eyes had opened on her face when he came to her on the beach. Was it too late to turn back? Once more, she asked herself that question—and now, for the first time, she asked it in doubt.

She ran up to her own room with a lurking distrust in her changed self, which warned her to act, and not to think. Without waiting to remove her shawl or to take off her hat, she opened her writing-case, and

addressed these lines to Captain Wragge, as fast as her pen could trace them.

“ You will find the money I promised you, enclosed in this. My resolution has failed me. The horror of marrying him is more than I can face. I have left Aldborough. Pity my weakness, and forget me. Let us never meet again.”

With throbbing heart, with eager, trembling fingers, she drew her little white silk bag from her bosom, and took out the bank-notes to enclose them in the letter. Her hand searched impetuously; her hand had lost its discrimination of touch. She grasped the whole contents of the bag in one handful of papers; and drew them out violently, tearing some and disarranging the folds of others. As she threw them down before her on the table, the first object that met her eye was her own handwriting, faded already with time. She looked closer, and saw the words she had copied from her dead father’s letter—saw the lawyer’s brief and terrible commentary on them, confronting her at the bottom of the page :

Mr. Vanstone’s daughters are Nobody’s Children, and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle’s mercy.

Her throbbing heart stopped; her trembling hands grew icily quiet. All the Past rose before her in mute overwhelming reproach. She took up the lines which her own hand had written hardly a minute since, and looked at the ink still wet on the letters, with a vacant incredulity.

The colour that had risen on her cheeks faded from

them once more. The hard despair looked out again, cold and glittering, in her tearless eyes. She folded the bank-notes carefully, and put them back in her bag. She pressed the copy of her father's letter to her lips, and returned it to its place, with the bank-notes. When the bag was in her bosom again, she waited a little, with her face hidden in her hands—then deliberately tore up the lines addressed to Captain Wragge. Before the ink was dry, the letter lay in fragments on the floor.

"No!" she said, as the last morsel of the torn paper dropped from her hand. "On the way I go, there is no turning back."

She rose composedly, and left the room. While descending the stairs she met Mrs. Wragge coming up. "Going out again, my dear?" asked Mrs. Wragge. "May I go with you?"

Magdalen's attention wandered. Instead of answering the question, she absently answered her own thoughts.

"Thousands of women marry for money," she said. "Why shouldn't I?"

The helpless perplexity of Mrs. Wragge's face, as she spoke those words, roused her to a sense of present things.

"My poor dear!" she said; "I puzzle you, don't I? Never mind what I say,—all girls talk nonsense; and I'm no better than the rest of them. Come! I'll give you a treat. You shall enjoy yourself while the captain is away. We will have a long drive by our-

selves. Put on your smart bonnet, and come with me to the hotel. I'll tell the landlady to put a nice cold dinner into a basket. You shall have all the things you like—and I'll wait on you. When you are an old, old woman, you will remember me kindly, won't you? You will say, 'She wasn't a bad girl; hundreds worse than she was live and prosper, and nobody blames them.' There! there! go and put your bonnet on. Oh, my God, what is my heart made of! How it lives and lives, when other girls' hearts would have died in them long ago!"

In half an hour more, she and Mrs. Wragge were seated together in the carriage. One of the horses was restive at starting. "Flog him," she cried angrily to the driver. "What are you frightened about? Flog him! Suppose the carriage was upset," she said, turning suddenly to her companion; "and suppose I was thrown out, and killed on the spot? Nonsense! don't look at me in that way. I'm like your husband; I have a dash of humour, and I'm only joking."

They were out the whole day. When they reached home again, it was after dark. The long succession of hours passed in the fresh air, left them both with the same sense of fatigue. Again that night, Magdalen slept the deep dreamless sleep of the night before. And so the Friday closed.

Her last thought at night, had been the thought which had sustained her throughout the day. She had laid her head on the pillow, with the same reckless

resolution to submit to the coming trial, which had already expressed itself in words, when she and Mrs. Wragge met by accident on the stairs. When she woke on the morning of Saturday, the resolution was gone. The Friday's thoughts—the Friday's events even—were blotted out of her mind. Once again, creeping chill through the flow of her young blood, she felt the slow and deadly prompting of despair, which had come to her in the waning moonlight, which had whispered to her in the awful calm.

"I saw the end, as the end must be," she said to herself, "on Thursday night. I have been wrong ever since."

When she and her companion met that morning, she reiterated her complaint of suffering from the toothache; she repeated her refusal to allow Mrs. Wragge to procure a remedy; she left the house after breakfast, in the direction of the chemist's shop, exactly as she had left it on the morning before.

This time she entered the shop without an instant's hesitation.

"I have got an attack of toothache," she said abruptly to an elderly man who stood behind the counter.

"May I look at the tooth, Miss?"

"There is no necessity to look. It is a hollow tooth. I think I have caught cold in it."

The chemist recommended various remedies, which were in vogue fifteen years since. She declined purchasing any of them.

"I have always found Laudanum relieve the pain

better than anything else," she said, trifling with the bottles on the counter, and looking at them while she spoke, instead of looking at the chemist. "Let me have some Laudanum."

"Certainly, Miss. Excuse my asking the question—it is only a matter of form. You are staying at Aldborough, I think?"

"Yes. I am Miss Bygrave, of North Shingles."

The chemist bowed ; and, turning to his shelves, filled an ordinary half-ounce bottle with laudanum, immediately. In ascertaining his customer's name and address beforehand, the owner of the shop had taken a precaution which was natural to a careful man—but which was by no means universal, under similar circumstances, in the state of the law at that time.

"Shall I put you up a little cotton wool with the laudanum?" he asked, after he had placed a label on the bottle, and had written a word on it in large letters.

"If you please. What have you just written on the bottle?" She put the question sharply, with something of distrust as well as curiosity in her manner.

The chemist answered the question by turning the label towards her. She saw written on it, in large letters—POISON.

"I like to be on the safe side, Miss," said the old man, smiling. "Very worthy people in other respects, are often sadly careless, where poisons are concerned."

She began trifling again with the bottles on the counter ; and put another question, with an ill-concealed anxiety to hear the answer.

“Is there danger,” she asked, “in such a little drop of Laudanum as that?”

“There is Death in it, Miss,” replied the chemist quietly.

“Death to a child, or to a person in delicate health?”

“Death to the strongest man in England, let him be who he may.”

With that answer, the chemist sealed up the bottle in its wrapping of white paper, and handed the laudanum to Magdalen across the counter. She laughed as she took it from him, and paid for it.

“There will be no fear of accidents at North Shingles,” she said. “I shall keep the bottle locked up in my dressing-case. If it doesn’t relieve the pain, I must come to you again, and try some other remedy. Good morning.”

“Good morning, Miss.”

She went straight back to the house, without once looking up, without noticing any one who passed her. She brushed by Mrs. Wragge in the passage, as she might have brushed by a piece of furniture. She ascended the stairs, and caught her foot twice in her dress, from sheer inattention to the common precaution of holding it up. The trivial daily interests of life had lost their hold on her already.

In the privacy of her own room, she took the bottle from its wrapping, and threw the paper and the cotton wool into the fireplace. At the moment when she did this there was a knock at the door. She hid the little bottle,

and looked up impatiently. Mrs. Wragge came into the room.

"Have you got something for your toothache, my dear?"

"Yes."

"Can I do anything to help you?"

"No."

Mrs. Wragge still lingered uneasily near the door. Her manner showed plainly that she had something more to say.

"What is it?" asked Magdalen, sharply.

"Don't be angry," said Mrs. Wragge. "I'm not settled in my mind about the captain. He's a great writer—and he hasn't written. He's as quick as lightning—and he hasn't come back. Here's Saturday, and no signs of him. Has he run away, do you think? Has anything happened to him?"

"I should think not. Go down stairs; I'll come and speak to you about it directly."

As soon as she was alone again, Magdalen rose from her chair, advanced towards a cupboard in the room which locked, and paused for a moment, with her hand on the key, in doubt. Mrs. Wragge's appearance had disturbed the whole current of her thoughts. Mrs. Wragge's last question, trifling as it was, had checked her on the verge of the precipice—had roused the old vain hope in her once more of release by accident.

"Why not?" she said. "Why may something not have happened to one of them?"

She placed the laudanum in the cupboard, locked it, and put the key in her pocket. "Time enough still," she thought, "before Monday. I'll wait till the captain comes back."

After some consultation down-stairs, it was agreed that the servant should sit up that night, in expectation of her master's return. The day passed quietly, without events of any kind. Magdalen dreamed away the hours over a book. A weary patience of expectation was all she felt now—the poignant torment of thought was dulled and blunted at last. She passed the day and the evening in the parlour, vaguely conscious of a strange feeling of aversion to going back to her own room. As the night advanced, as the noises ceased indoors and out, her restlessness began to return. She endeavoured to quiet herself by reading. Books failed to fix her attention. The newspaper was lying in a corner of the room : she tried the newspaper next.

She looked mechanically at the headings of the articles ; she listlessly turned over page after page, until her wandering attention was arrested by the narrative of an Execution in a distant part of England. There was nothing to strike her in the story of the crime ; and yet she read it. It was a common, horribly common, act of bloodshed—the murder of a woman in farm-service, by a man in the same employment who was jealous of her. He had been convicted on no extraordinary evidence ; he had been hanged under no unusual circumstances. He had made his confession, when he knew there was no hope for him, like other

criminals of his class ; and the newspaper had printed it at the end of the article, in these terms :—

“I kept company with the deceased for a year or thereabouts. I said I would marry her when I had money enough. She said I had money enough now. We had a quarrel. She refused to walk out with me any more ; she wouldn’t draw me my beer ; she took up with my fellow-servant, David Crouch. I went to her on the Saturday, and said I would marry her as soon as we could be asked in church, if she would give up Crouch. She laughed at me. She turned me out of the washhouse, and the rest of them saw her turn me out. I was not easy in my mind. I went and sat on a gate—the gate in the meadow they call Pettit’s Piece. I thought I would shoot her. I went and fetched my gun and loaded it. I went out into Pettit’s Piece again. I was hard put to it, to make up my mind. I thought I would try my luck—I mean try whether to kill her or not—by throwing up the Spud of the plough into the air. I said to myself, if it falls flat, I’ll spare her ; if it falls point in the earth, I’ll kill her. I took a good swing with it, and shied it up. It fell point in the earth. I went and shot her. It was a bad job, but I did it. I did it, as they said I did it at the trial. I hope the Lord will have mercy on me. I wish my mother to have my old clothes. I have no more to say.”

In the happier days of her life, Magdalen would have passed over the narrative of the execution, and the printed confession which accompanied it, unread

—the subject would have failed to attract her. She read the horrible story now—read it, with an interest unintelligible to herself. Her attention, which had wandered over higher and better things, followed every sentence of the murderer's hideously direct confession, from beginning to end. If the man, or the woman, had been known to her—if the place had been familiar to her memory—she could hardly have followed the narrative more closely, or have felt a more distinct impression of it left on her mind. She laid down the paper, wondering at herself; she took it up once more, and tried to read some other portion of the contents. The effort was useless; her attention wandered again. She threw the paper away; and went out into the garden. The night was dark; the stars were few and faint. She could just see the gravel walk—she could just pace backwards and forwards between the house-door and the gate.

The confession in the newspaper had taken a fearful hold on her mind. As she paced the walk, the black night opened over the sea, and showed her the murderer in the field, hurling the Spud of the plough into the air. She ran, shuddering, back to the house. The murderer followed her into the parlour. She seized the candle, and went up into her room. The vision of her own distempered fancy followed her to the place where the laudanum was hidden—and vanished there.

It was midnight; and there was no sign yet of the captain's return.

She took from the writing-case the long letter which she had written to Norah, and slowly read it through. The letter quieted her. When she reached the blank space left at the end, she hurriedly turned back, and began it over again.

One o'clock struck from the church clock ; and still the captain never appeared.

She read the letter for the second time ; she turned back obstinately, despairingly ; and began it for the third time. As she once more reached the last page, she looked at her watch. It was a quarter to two. She had just put the watch back in the belt of her dress, when there came to her—far off in the stillness of the morning—a sound of wheels.

She dropped the letter, and clasped her cold hands in her lap, and listened. The sound came on, faster and faster, nearer and nearer—the trivial sound to all other ears ; the sound of Doom to hers. It passed the side of the house ; it travelled a little further on ; it stopped. She heard a loud knocking—then the opening of a window—then voices—then a long silence—then the wheels again, coming back—then the opening of the door below, and the sound of the captain's voice in the passage.

She could endure it no longer. She opened her door a little way, and called to him.

He ran up-stairs instantly, astonished that she was not in bed. She spoke to him through the narrow opening of the door ; keeping herself hidden behind it, for she was afraid to let him see her face.

"Has anything gone wrong?" she asked.

"Make your mind easy," he answered. "Nothing has gone wrong."

"Is no accident likely to happen between this and Monday?"

"None whatever. The marriage is a certainty."

"A certainty?"

"Yes."

"Good night."

She put her hand out through the door. He took it with some little surprise; it was not often in his experience that she gave him her hand of her own accord.

"You have sat up too long," he said, as he felt the clasp of her cold fingers. "I am afraid you will have a bad night—I'm afraid you will not sleep."

She softly closed the door.

"I shall sleep," she said, "sounder than you think for."

It was past two o'clock when she shut herself up alone in her room. Her chair stood in its customary place by the toilette table. She sat down for a few minutes thoughtfully—then opened her letter to Norah, and turned to the end, where the blank space was left. The last lines written above the space ran thus: . . . "I have laid my whole heart bare to you; I have hidden nothing. It has come to this. The end I have toiled for, at such terrible cost to myself, is an end which I must reach or die. It is wickedness,

madness, what you will—but it is so. There are now two journeys before me to choose between. If I can marry him—the journey to the church. If the profanation of myself is more than I can bear—the journey to the grave !”

Under that last sentence, she wrote these lines :—

“My choice is made. If the cruel law will let you, lay me with my father and mother, in the churchyard at home. Farewell, my love ! Be always innocent ; be always happy. If Frank ever asks about me, say I died forgiving him. Don’t grieve long for me, Norah—I am not worth it.”

She sealed the letter, and addressed it to her sister. The tears gathered in her eyes as she laid it on the table. She waited until her sight was clear again, and then took the bank-notes once more from the little bag in her bosom. After wrapping them in a sheet of note-paper, she wrote Captain Wragge’s name on the enclosure, and added these words below it : “Lock the door of my room, and leave me till my sister comes. The money I promised you is in this. You are not to blame ; it is my fault, and mine only. If you have any friendly remembrance of me, be kind to your wife for my sake.”

After placing the enclosure by the letter to Norah, she rose and looked round the room. Some few little things in it were not in their places. She set them in order, and drew the curtains on either side, at the head of her bed. Her own dress was the next object of her scrutiny. It was all as neat, as pure, as prettily

arranged as ever. Nothing about her was disordered, but her hair. Some tresses had fallen loose on one side of her head; she carefully put them back in their places, with the help of her glass. "How pale I look!" she thought, with a faint smile. "Shall I be paler still, when they find me in the morning?"

She went straight to the place where the laudanum was hidden, and took it out. The bottle was so small, that it lay easily in the palm of her hand. She let it remain there for a little while, and stood looking at it.

"DEATH!" she said. "In this drop of brown drink—DEATH!"

As the words passed her lips, an agony of unutterable horror seized on her in an instant. She crossed the room unsteadily with a maddening confusion in her head, with a suffocating anguish at her heart. She caught at the table to support herself. The faint clink of the bottle, as it fell harmlessly from her loosened grasp, and rolled against some porcelain object on the table, struck though her brain like the stroke of a knife. The sound of her own voice, sunk to a whisper—her voice only uttering that one word, Death—rushed in her ears like the rushing of a wind. She dragged herself to the bedside, and rested her head against it, sitting on the floor. "Oh, my life! my life!" she thought; "what is my life worth, that I cling to it like this?"

An interval passed, and she felt her strength returning. She raised herself on her knees, and hid her face on the bed. She tried to pray—to pray to be

forgiven for seeking the refuge of death. Frantic words burst from her lips—words which would have risen to cries, if she had not stifled them in the bed-clothes. She started to her feet; despair strengthened her with a headlong fury against herself. In one moment, she was back at the table; in another, the poison was once more in her hand.

She removed the cork, and lifted the bottle to her mouth.

At the first cold touch of the glass on her lips, her strong young life leapt up in her leaping blood, and fought with the whole frenzy of its loathing against the close terror of Death. Every active power in the exuberant vital force that was in her, rose in revolt against the destruction which her own will would fain have wreaked on her own life. She paused: for the second time, she paused in spite of herself. There, in the glorious perfection of her youth and health—there, trembling on the verge of human existence, she stood; with the kiss of the Destroyer close at her lips, and Nature, faithful to its sacred trust, fighting for the salvation of her to the last.

No word passed her lips. Her cheeks flushed deep; her breath came thick and fast. With the poison still in her hand, with the sense that she might faint in another moment, she made for the window, and threw back the curtain that covered it.

The new day had risen. The broad grey dawn flowed in on her, over the quiet eastern sea.

She saw the waters, heaving large and silent in the

misty calm ; she felt the fresh breath of the morning flutter cool on her face. Her strength returned ; her mind cleared a little. At the sight of the sea, her memory recalled the walk in the garden, overnight, and the picture which her distempered fancy had painted on the black void. In thought, she saw the picture again—the murderer hurling the Spud of the plough into the air, and setting the life or death of the woman who had deserted him, on the hazard of the falling point. The infection of that terrible superstition seized on her mind, as suddenly as the new day had burst on her view. The promise of release which she saw in it from the horror of her own hesitation, roused the last energies of her despair. She resolved to end the struggle, by setting her life or death on the hazard of a chance.

On what chance ?

The sea showed it to her. Dimly distinguishable through the mist, she saw a little fleet of coasting vessels slowly drifting towards the house, all following the same direction with the favouring set of the tide. In half an hour—perhaps in less—the fleet would have passed her window. The hands of her watch pointed to four o'clock. She seated herself close at the side of the window, with her back towards the quarter from which the vessels were drifting down on her—with the poison placed on the window-sill, and the watch on her lap. For one half-hour to come, she determined to wait there, and count the vessels as they went by. If, in that time, an even number passed her—the sign

given, should be a sign to live. If the uneven number prevailed—the end should be Death.

With that final resolution, she rested her head against the window, and waited for the ships to pass.

The first came ; high, dark, and near in the mist ; gliding silently over the silent sea. An interval—and the second followed, with the third close after it. Another interval, longer and longer drawn out—and nothing passed. She looked at her watch. Twelve minutes ; and three ships. Three.

The fourth came ; slower than the rest, larger than the rest, farther off in the mist than the rest. The interval followed ; a long interval once more. Then the next vessel passed, darkest and nearest of all. Five. The next uneven number—Five.

She looked at her watch again. Nineteen minutes ; and five ships. Twenty minutes. Twenty-one, two, three—and no sixth vessel. Twenty-four ; and the sixth came by. Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight ; and the next uneven number—the fatal Seven—glided into view. Two minutes to the end of the half-hour. And seven ships.

Twenty-nine ; and nothing followed in the wake of the seventh ship. The minute-hand of the watch moved on half way to thirty—and still the white heaving sea was a misty blank. Without moving her head from the window, she took the poison in one hand, and raised the watch in the other. As the quick seconds counted each other out, her eyes, as quick as they, looked from the watch to the sea, from the sea to the

watch—looked for the last time at the sea—and saw the EIGHTH ship.

She never moved ; she never spoke. The death of thought, the death of feeling, seemed to have come to her already. She put back the poison mechanically on the ledge of the window ; and watched, as in a dream, the ship gliding smoothly on its silent way—gliding till it melted dimly into shadow—gliding till it was lost in the mist.

The strain on her mind relaxed, when the Messenger of Life had passed from her sight.

“Providence?” she whispered faintly to herself.
“Or chance?”

Her eyes closed, and her head fell back. When the sense of life returned to her, the morning sun was warm on her face—the blue heaven looked down on her—and the sea was a sea of gold.

She fell on her knees at the window, and burst into tears.

* * * * *

Towards noon that day, the captain, waiting below stairs, and hearing no movement in Magdalen's room, felt uneasy at the long silence. He desired the new maid to follow him up-stairs ; and, pointing to the door, told her to go in softly, and see whether her mistress was awake.

The maid entered the room ; remained there a moment ; and came out again, closing the door gently.

“She looks beautiful, sir,” said the girl ; “and she's sleeping as quietly as a new-born child.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE morning of her husband's return to North Shingles was a morning memorable for ever in the domestic calendar of Mrs. Wragge. She dated from that occasion the first announcement which reached her of Magdalen's marriage.

It had been Mrs. Wragge's earthly lot to pass her life in a state of perpetual surprise. Never yet, however, had she wandered in such a maze of astonishment as the maze in which she lost herself when the captain coolly told her the truth. She had been sharp enough to suspect Mr. Noel Vanstone of coming to the house in the character of a sweetheart on approval; and she had dimly interpreted certain expressions of impatience which had fallen from Magdalen's lips, as boding ill for the success of his suit—but her utmost penetration had never reached as far as a suspicion of the impending marriage. She rose from one climax of amazement to another, as her husband proceeded with his disclosure. A wedding in the family at a day's notice! and that wedding Magdalen's! and not a single new dress ordered for anybody, the bride included! and the Oriental Cashmere Robe totally

unavailable, on the occasion when she might have worn it to the greatest advantage! Mrs. Wragge dropped crookedly into a chair, and beat her disorderly hands on her unsymmetrical knees, in utter forgetfulness of the captain's presence, and the captain's terrible eye. It would not have surprised her to hear next, that the world had come to an end, and that the only mortal whom Destiny had overlooked in winding up the affairs of this earthly planet, was herself!

Leaving his wife to recover her composure by her own unaided efforts, Captain Wragge withdrew to wait for Magdalen's appearance in the lower regions of the house. It was close on one o'clock before the sound of footsteps in the room above, warned him that she was awake and stirring. He called at once for the maid (whose name he had ascertained to be Louisa), and sent her up-stairs to her mistress for the second time.

Magdalen was standing by her dressing-table, when a faint tap at the door suddenly roused her. The tap was followed by the sound of a meek voice, which announced itself as the voice of "her maid," and inquired if Miss Bygrave needed any assistance that morning.

"Not at present," said Magdalen, as soon as she had recovered the surprise of finding herself unexpectedly provided with an attendant. "I will ring when I want you."

After dismissing the woman with that answer, she accidentally looked from the door to the window. Any

speculations on the subject of the new servant in which she might otherwise have engaged, were instantly suspended by the sight of the bottle of laudanum, still standing on the ledge of the window, where she had left it at sunrise. She took it once more in her hand, with a strange confusion of feeling—with a vague doubt even yet, whether the sight of it reminded her of a terrible reality or a terrible dream. Her first impulse was to rid herself of it on the spot. She raised the bottle to throw the contents out of the window—and paused, in sudden distrust of the impulse that had come to her. “I have accepted my new life,” she thought. “How do I know what that life may have in store for me?” She turned from the window, and went back to the table. “I may be forced to drink it yet,” she said—and put the laudanum into her dressing-case.

Her mind was not at ease when she had done this : there seemed to be some indefinable ingratitude in the act. Still she made no attempt to remove the bottle from its hiding-place. She hurried on her toilette ; she hastened the time when she could ring for the maid, and forget herself and her waking thoughts in a new subject. After touching the bell, she took from the table her letter to Norah and her letter to the captain ; put them both into her dressing-case with the laudanum ; and locked it securely with the key which she kept attached to her watch-chain.

Magdalen’s first impression of her attendant was not an agreeable one. She could not investigate the girl

with the experienced eye of the landlady at the London hotel, who had characterized the stranger as a young person overtaken by misfortune ; and who had shown plainly by her look and manner, of what nature she suspected that misfortune to be. But, with this drawback, Magdalen was perfectly competent to detect the tokens of sickness and sorrow, lurking under the surface of the new maid's activity and politeness. She suspected the girl was ill tempered ; she disliked her name ; and she was indisposed to welcome any servant who had been engaged by Noel Vanstone. But after the first few minutes, "Louisa" grew on her liking. She answered all the questions put to her, with perfect directness ; she appeared to understand her duties thoroughly ; and she never spoke until she was spoken to first. After making all the inquiries that occurred to her at the time, and after determining to give the maid a fair trial, Magdalen rose to leave the room. The very air in it was still heavy to her with the oppression of the past night.

"Have you anything more to say to me?" she asked, turning to the servant, with her hand on the door.

"I beg your pardon, Miss," said Louisa, very respectfully and very quietly. "I think my master told me that the marriage was to be to-morrow?"

Magdalen repressed the shudder that stole over her, at that reference to the marriage on the lips of a stranger, and answered in the affirmative.

"It's a very short time, Miss, to prepare in. If you

would be so kind as to give me my orders about the packing before you go down stairs ——?”

“There are no such preparations to make as you suppose,” said Magdalen hastily. “The few things I have here, can be all packed at once, if you like. I shall wear the same dress to-morrow which I have on to-day. Leave out the straw bonnet, and the light shawl, and put everything else into my boxes. I have no new dresses to pack—I have nothing ordered for the occasion, of any sort.” She tried to add some commonplace phrases of explanation, accounting as probably as might be, for the absence of the usual wedding outfit, and wedding-dress. But no further reference to the marriage would pass her lips, and without another word she abruptly left the room.

The meek and melancholy Louisa stood lost in astonishment. “Something wrong here,” she thought. “I’m half afraid of my new place already.” She sighed resignedly—shook her head—and went to the wardrobe. She first examined the drawers underneath; took out the various articles of linen laid inside; and placed them on chairs. Opening the upper part of the wardrobe next, she ranged the dresses in it side by side on the bed. Her last proceeding was to push the empty boxes into the middle of the room, and to compare the space at her disposal with the articles of dress which she had to pack. She completed her preliminary calculations with the ready self-reliance of a woman who thoroughly understood her business, and began the packing forthwith. Just

as she had placed the first article of linen in the smaller box, the door of the room opened; and the house-servant, eager for gossip, came in.

“What do you want?” asked Louisa quietly.

“Did you ever hear of anything like this!” said the house-servant, entering on her subject immediately.

“Like what?”

“Like this marriage, to be sure. You’re London bred, they tell me. Did you ever hear of a young lady being married, without a single new thing to her back? No wedding veil, and no wedding breakfast, and no wedding favours for the servants! It’s flying in the face of Providence—that’s what I say. I’m only a poor servant, I know. But it’s wicked, downright wicked—and I don’t care who hears me!”

Louisa went on with the packing.

“Look at her dresses!” persisted the house-servant, waiving her hand indignantly at the bed. “I’m only a poor girl—but I wouldn’t marry the best man alive without a new gown to my back. Look here! look at this dowdy brown thing here. Alpaca! You’re not going to pack this Alpaca thing, are you? Why it’s hardly fit for a servant! I don’t know that I’d take a gift of it if it was offered me. It would do for me if I took it up in the skirt, and let it out in the waist—and it wouldn’t look so bad with a bit of bright trimming, would it?”

“Let that dress alone, if you please,” said Louisa, as quietly as ever.

“What did you say?” inquired the other, doubting whether her ears had not deceived her.

“I said—let that dress alone. It belongs to my mistress; and I have my mistress’s orders to pack up everything in the room. You are not helping me by coming here—you are very much in my way.”

“Well!” said the house-servant, “you may be London bred, as they say. But if these are your London manners—give me Suffolk!” She opened the door, with an angry snatch at the handle, shut it violently, opened it again, and looked in. “Give me Suffolk!” said the house-servant, with a parting nod of her head to point the edge of her sarcasm.

Louisa proceeded impenetrably with her packing up.

Having neatly disposed of the linen in the smaller box, she turned her attention to the dresses next. After passing them carefully in review, to ascertain which was the least valuable of the collection, and to place that one at the bottom of the trunk for the rest to lie on, she made her choice with very little difficulty. The first gown which she put into the box, was—the brown Alpaca dress.

Meanwhile, Magdalen had joined the captain down stairs. Although he could not fail to notice the languor in her face and the listlessness of all her movements, he was relieved to find that she met him with perfect composure. She was even self-possessed enough to ask him for news of his journey, with no other signs of

agitation than a passing change of colour, and a little trembling of the lips.

“So much for the past,” said Captain Wragge, when his narrative of the expedition to London, by way of St. Crux, had come to an end. “Now for the present. The bridegroom——”

“If it makes no difference,” she interposed, “call him Mr. Noel Vanstone.”

“With all my heart. Mr. Noel Vanstone is coming here this afternoon to dine and spend the evening. He will be tiresome in the last degree—but like all tiresome people, he is not to be got rid of on any terms. Before he comes, I have a last word or two of caution for your private ear. By this time to-morrow we shall have parted—without any certain knowledge, on either side, of our ever meeting again. I am anxious to serve your interests faithfully to the last—I am anxious you should feel that I have done all I could for your future security, when we say good-bye.”

Magdalen looked at him in surprise. He spoke in altered tones. He was agitated ; he was strangely in earnest. Something in his look and manner took her memory back to the first night at Aldborough, when she had opened her mind to him in the darkening solitude—when they two had sat together alone, on the slope of the martello tower.

“I have no reason to think otherwise than kindly of you,” she said.

Captain Wragge suddenly left his chair, and took a turn backwards and forwards in the room. Magdalen’s

last words seemed to have produced some extraordinary disturbance in him.

"Damn it!" he broke out; "I can't let you say that. You have reason to think ill of me. I have cheated you. You never got your fair share of profit from the Entertainment, from first to last. There! now the murder's out!"

Magdalen smiled, and signed to him to come back to his chair.

"I know you cheated me," she said, quietly. "You were in the exercise of your profession, Captain Wragge. I expected it when I joined you. I made no complaint at the time; and I make none now. If the money you took is any recompense for all the trouble I have given you, you are heartily welcome to it."

"Will you shake hands on that?" asked the captain, with an awkwardness and hesitation, strongly at variance with his customary ease of manner.

Magdalen gave him her hand. He wrung it hard. "You are a strange girl," he said, trying to speak lightly. "You have laid a hold on me that I don't quite understand. I'm half uncomfortable at taking the money from you, now—and yet, you don't want it, do you?" He hesitated. "I almost wish," he said, "I had never met you on the walls of York."

"It is too late to wish that, Captain Wragge. Say no more. You only distress me—say no more. We have other subjects to talk about. What were those words of caution which you had for my private car?"

The captain took another turn in the room, and struggled back again into his every-day character. He produced from his pocket-book Mrs. Lecount's letter to her master, and handed it to Magdalen.

"There is the letter that might have ruined us, if it had ever reached its address," he said. "Read it carefully. I have a question to ask you when you have done."

Magdalen read the letter. "What is this proof," she inquired, "which Mrs. Lecount relies on so confidently?"

"The very question I was going to ask you," said Captain Wragge. "Consult your memory of what happened, when you tried that experiment in Vauxhall Walk. Did Mrs. Lecount get no other chance against you, than the chances you have told me of already?"

"She discovered that my face was disguised, and she heard me speak in my own voice."

"And nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

"Very good. Then my interpretation of the letter is clearly the right one. The proof Mrs. Lecount relies on, is my wife's infernal ghost story—which is, in plain English, the story of Miss Bygrave having been seen in Miss Vanstone's disguise; the witness being the very person who is afterwards presented at Aldborough, in the character of Miss Bygrave's aunt. An excellent chance for Mrs. Lecount, if she can only lay her hand at the right time on Mrs. Wragge—and no chance at all, if she can't. Make your mind easy

on that point. Mrs. Lecount and my wife have seen the last of each other. In the mean time, don't neglect the warning I give you, in giving you this letter. Tear it up, for fear of accidents—but don't forget it."

"Trust me to remember it," replied Magdalen, destroying the letter while she spoke. "Have you anything more to tell me?"

"I have some information to give you," said Captain Wragge, "which may be useful, because it relates to your future security. Mind, I want to know nothing about your proceedings when to-morrow is over—we settled that when we first discussed this matter. I ask no questions, and I make no guesses. All I want to do now, is to warn you of your legal position, after your marriage; and to leave you to make what use you please of your knowledge, at your own sole discretion. I took a lawyer's opinion on the point, when I was in London, thinking it might be useful to you."

"It is sure to be useful. What did the lawyer say?"

"To put it plainly, this is what he said. If Mr. Noel Vanstone ever discovers that you have knowingly married him under a false name, he can apply to the Ecclesiastical Court to have his marriage declared null and void. The issue of the application would rest with the Judges. But if he could prove that he had been intentionally deceived, the legal opinion is that his case would be a strong one."

"Suppose I chose to apply on my side?" said Magdalen, eagerly. "What then?"

“You might make the application,” replied the captain. “But remember one thing—you would come into Court, with the acknowledgment of your own deception. I leave you to imagine what the Judges would think of that.”

“Did the lawyer tell you anything else?”

“One thing besides,” said Captain Wragge. “Whatever the law might do with the marriage in the lifetime of both the parties to it—on the death of either one of them, no application made by the survivor would avail; and, as to the case of that survivor, the marriage would remain valid. You understand? If he dies, or if you die—and if no application has been made to the Court—he the survivor, or you the survivor, would have no power of disputing the marriage. But, in the lifetime of both of you, if he claimed to have the marriage dissolved, the chances are all in favour of his carrying his point.”

He looked at Magdalen with a furtive curiosity as he said those words. She turned her head aside, absently tying her watch-chain into a loop and untying it again; evidently thinking with the closest attention over what he had last said to her. Captain Wragge walked uneasily to the window, and looked out. The first object that caught his eye was Mr. Noel Vanstone approaching from Sea View. He returned instantly to his former place in the room, and addressed himself to Magdalen once more.

“Here is Mr. Noel Vanstone,” he said. “One last caution before he comes in. Be on your guard

with him about your age. He put the question to me before he got the Licence. I took the shortest way out of the difficulty, and told him you were Twenty-one—and he made the declaration accordingly. Never mind about *me*; after to-morrow, I am invisible. But, in your own interests, don't forget, if the subject turns up, that you were of age when you married. There is nothing more. You are provided with every necessary warning that I can give you. Whatever happens in the future—remember I have done my best.”

He hurried to the door, without waiting for an answer, and went out into the garden to receive his guest.

Noel Vanstone made his appearance at the gate, solemnly carrying his bridal offering to North Shingles with both hands. The object in question was an ancient casket (one of his father's bargains); inside the casket reposed an old-fashioned carbuncle brooch, set in silver (another of his father's bargains)—bridal presents both, possessing the inestimable merit of leaving his money undisturbed in his pocket. He shook his head portentously when the captain inquired after his health and spirits. He had passed a wakeful night; ungovernable apprehensions of Lecount's sudden reappearance had beset him, as soon as he found himself alone at Sea View. Sea View was redolent of Lecount: Sea View (though built on piles, and the strongest house in England) was henceforth odious to him. He had felt this all night; he had also felt his responsibilities. There was the lady's

maid, to begin with. Now he had hired her, he began to think she wouldn't do. She might fall sick on his hands; she might have deceived him by a false character; she and the landlady of the hotel might have been in league together. Horrible! Really horrible to think of. Then there was the other responsibility—perhaps the heaviest of the two—the responsibility of deciding where he was to go and spend his honeymoon to-morrow. He would have preferred one of his father's empty houses. But, except at Vauxhall Walk (which he supposed would be objected to), and at Aldborough (which was of course out of the question), all the houses were let. He would put himself in Mr. Bygrave's hands. Where had Mr. Bygrave spent his own honeymoon? Given the British Islands to choose from, where would Mr. Bygrave pitch his tent, on a careful review of all the circumstances?

At this point, the bridegroom's questions suddenly came to an end, and the bridegroom's face exhibited an expression of ungovernable astonishment. His judicious friend whose advice had been at his disposal in every other emergency, suddenly turned round on him, in the emergency of the honeymoon, and flatly declined discussing the subject.

"No!" said the captain, as Noel Vanstone opened his lips to plead for a hearing, "you must really excuse me. My point of view, in this matter, is, as usual, a peculiar one. For some time past, I have been living in an atmosphere of deception, to suit your convenience.

That atmosphere, my good sir, is getting close—my Moral Being requires ventilation. Settle the choice of a locality with my niece; and leave me, at my particular request, in total ignorance of the subject. Mrs. Lecount is certain to come here on her return from Zurich, and is certain to ask me where you are gone. You may think it strange, Mr. Vanstone—but when I tell her I don't know, I wish to enjoy the unaccustomed luxury of feeling, for once in a way, that I am speaking the truth !”

With those words, he opened the sitting-room door; introduced Noel Vanstone to Magdalen's presence; bowed himself out of the room again; and set forth alone to while away the rest of the afternoon by taking a walk. His face showed plain tokens of anxiety, and his parti-coloured eyes looked hither and thither distrustfully, as he sauntered along the shore. “The time hangs heavy on our hands,” thought the captain. “I wish to-morrow was come and gone.”

The day passed and nothing happened; the evening and the night followed, placidly and uneventfully. Monday came, a cloudless lovely day—Monday confirmed the captain's assertion that the marriage was a certainty. Towards ten o'clock, the clerk ascending the church steps, quoted the old proverb to the pew-opener, meeting him under the porch: “Happy the bride on whom the sun shines !”

In a quarter of an hour more, the wedding party was in the vestry, and the clergyman led the way to the altar.

Carefully as the secret of the marriage had been kept, the opening of the church in the morning had been enough to betray it. A small congregation, almost entirely composed of women, was scattered here and there among the pews. Kirke's sister and her children were staying with a friend at Aldborough—and Kirke's sister was one of the congregation.

As the wedding party entered the church, the haunting terror of Mrs. Lecount spread from Noel Vanstone to the captain. For the first few minutes, the eyes of both of them looked among the women in the pews, with the same searching scrutiny; and looked away again with the same sense of relief. The clergyman noticed that look, and investigated the Licence more closely than usual. The clerk began to doubt privately whether the old proverb about the bride, was a proverb to be always depended on. The female members of the congregation murmured among themselves at the inexcusable disregard of appearances implied in the bride's dress. Kirke's sister whispered venomously in her friend's ear, "Thank God for to-day for Robert's sake." Mrs. Wragge cried silently, with the dread of some threatening calamity, she knew not what. The one person present who remained outwardly undisturbed was Magdalen herself. She stood with tearless resignation in her place before the altar—stood, as if all the sources of human emotion were frozen up within her.

The clergyman opened the Book.

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It was done. The awful words which speak from earth to Heaven were pronounced. The children of the two dead brothers—inheritors of the implacable enmity which had parted their parents—were Man and Wife.

From that moment, events hurried with a headlong rapidity to the parting scene. They were back at the house, while the words of the Marriage Service seemed still ringing in their ears. Before they had been five minutes in-doors, the carriage drew up at the garden gate. In a minute more, the opportunity came for which Magdalen and the captain had been on the watch—the opportunity of speaking together in private for the last time. She still preserved her icy resignation—she seemed beyond all reach now of the fear that had once mastered her, of the remorse that had once tortured her to the soul. With a firm hand, she gave him the promised money. With a firm face, she looked her last at him. “I’m not to blame,” he whispered eagerly; “I have only done what you asked me.” She bowed her head—she bent it towards him kindly, and let him touch her forehead with his lips. “Take care!” he said. “My last words are—for God’s sake take care when I’m gone!” She turned from him with a smile, and spoke her farewell words to his wife. Mrs. Wragge tried hard to face her loss bravely—the loss of the friend whose presence had fallen like light from Heaven over the dim pathway of her life. “You have been very good to me, my dear; I thank you kindly; I thank you with all my heart.” She could say

no more—she clung to Magdalen, in a passion of tears, as her mother might have clung to her, if her mother had lived to see that horrible day. “I’m frightened for you!” cried the poor creature in a wild wailing voice. “Oh, my darling, I’m frightened for you!” Magdalen desperately drew herself free—kissed her—and hurried out to the door. The expression of that artless gratitude, the cry of that guileless love, shook her as nothing else had shaken her that day. It was a refuge to get to the carriage—a refuge, though the man she had married stood there waiting for her at the door.

Mrs. Wragge tried to follow her into the garden. But the captain had seen Magdalen’s face as she ran out; and he steadily held his wife back in the passage. From that distance, the last farewells were exchanged. As long as the carriage was in sight, Magdalen looked back at them—she waved her handkerchief, as she turned the corner. In a moment more, the last thread which bound her to them was broken; the familiar companionship of many months was a thing of the past already!

Captain Wragge closed the house-door on the idlers who were looking in from the parade. He led his wife back into the sitting-room, and spoke to her with a forbearance which she had never yet experienced from him.

“She has gone her way,” he said, “and in another hour we shall have gone ours. Cry your cry out—I don’t deny she’s worth crying for.”

Even then—even when the dread of Magdalen's future was at its darkest in his mind—the ruling habit of the man's life clung to him. Mechanically, he unlocked his despatch-box. Mechanically, he opened his Book of Accounts, and made the closing entry—the entry of his last transaction with Magdalen—in black and white. “By Rec^d from Miss Vanstone,” wrote the captain, with a gloomy brow, “Two hundred pounds.”

“You won't be angry with me?” said Mrs. Wragge, looking timidly at her husband through her tears. “I want a word of comfort, captain. Oh, do tell me—when shall I see her again?”

The captain closed the book, and answered in one inexorable word :

“Never!”

Between eleven and twelve o'clock that night, Mrs. Lecount drove into Zurich.

Her brother's house, when she stopped before it, was shut up. With some difficulty and delay the servant was aroused. She held up her hands in speechless amazement, when she opened the door, and saw who the visitor was.

“Is my brother alive?” asked Mrs. Lecount, entering the house.

“Alive!” echoed the servant. “He has gone holiday-making into the country, to finish his recovery in the fine fresh air.”

The housekeeper staggered back against the wall of the passage. The coachman and the servant put her

into a chair. Her face was livid, and her teeth chattered in her head.

"Send for my brother's doctor," she said, as soon as she could speak.

The doctor came. She handed him a letter, before he could say a word.

"Did you write that letter?"

He looked it over rapidly, and answered her without hesitation.

"Certainly not!"

"It is your handwriting."

"It is a forgery of my handwriting."

She rose from the chair, with a new strength in her.

"When does the return mail start for Paris?" she asked.

"In half an hour."

"Send instantly, and take me a place in it!"

The servant hesitated; the doctor protested. She turned a deaf ear to them both.

"Send!" she reiterated, "or I will go myself."

They obeyed. The servant went to take the place: the doctor remained, and held a conversation with Mrs. Lecount. When the half-hour had passed, he helped her into her place in the mail, and charged the conductor privately to take care of his passenger.

"She has travelled from England without stopping," said the doctor; "and she is travelling back again

without rest. Be careful of her, or she will break down under the double journey."

The mail started. Before the first hour of the new day was at an end, Mrs. Lecount was on her way back to England.

THE END OF THE FOURTH SCENE

BETWEEN THE SCENES.



PROGRESS OF THE STORY THROUGH THE
POST.

BETWEEN THE SCENES.

I.

FROM GEORGE BARTRAM TO NOEL VANSTONE.

“St. Crux, September 4th, 1847.

“MY DEAR NOEL,

“Here are two plain questions at starting. In the name of all that is mysterious, what are you hiding for? And why is everything relating to your marriage kept an impenetrable secret from your oldest friends?

“I have been to Aldborough to try if I could trace you from that place; and have come back as wise as I went. I have applied to your lawyer in London; and have been told in reply, that you have forbidden him to disclose the place of your retreat to any one, without first receiving your permission to do so. All I could prevail on him to say was, that he would forward any letter which might be sent to his care. I write accordingly—and, mind this, I expect an answer.

“You may ask, in your ill-tempered way, what business I have to meddle with affairs of yours, which

it is your pleasure to keep private. My dear Noel, there is a serious reason for our opening communications with you from this house. You don't know what events have taken place at St. Crux, since you ran away to get married; and though I detest writing letters, I must lose an hour's shooting to-day in trying to enlighten you.

"On the twenty-third of last month, the admiral and I were disturbed over our wine after dinner, by the announcement that a visitor had unexpectedly arrived at St. Crux. Who do you think the visitor was? Mrs. Lecount!

"My uncle, with that old-fashioned bachelor gallantry of his, which pays equal respect to all wearers of petticoats, left the table directly to welcome Mrs. Lecount. While I was debating whether I should follow him or not, my meditations were suddenly brought to an end by a loud call from the admiral. I ran into the morning-room—and there was your unfortunate housekeeper, on the sofa, with all the women-servants about her, more dead than alive. She had travelled from England to Zurich, and from Zurich back again to England, without stopping; and she looked, seriously and literally, at death's door. I immediately agreed with my uncle, that the first thing to be done was to send for medical help. We despatched a groom on the spot; and at Mrs. Lecount's own request, sent all the servants, in a body, out of the room.

"As soon as we were alone, Mrs. Lecount surprised

us by a singular question. She asked if you had received a letter which she had addressed to you before leaving England, at this house. When we told her that the letter had been forwarded, under cover to your friend Mr. Bygrave, by your own particular request, she turned as pale as ashes ; and when we added that you had left us in company with this same Mr. Bygrave, she clasped her hands and stared at us as if she had taken leave of her senses. Her next question was, ‘Where is Mr. Noel, now?’ We could only give her one reply—Mr. Noel had not informed us. She looked perfectly thunder-struck at that answer. ‘He has gone to his ruin!’ she said. ‘He has gone away in company with the greatest villain in England. I must find him! I tell you I must find Mr. Noel! If I don’t find him at once, it will be too late. He will be married!’ she burst out quite frantically. ‘On my honour and my oath he will be married!’ The admiral, incautiously perhaps, but with the best intentions, told her you were married already. She gave a scream that made the windows ring again, and dropped back on the sofa in a fainting fit. The doctor came, in the nick of time, and soon brought her to. But she was taken ill the same night—she has grown worse and worse ever since—and the last medical report is, that the fever from which she has been suffering is in a fair way to settle on her brain.

“Now, my dear Noel, neither my uncle nor I have any wish to intrude ourselves on your confidence. We are naturally astonished at the extraordinary mystery

which hangs over you and your marriage; and we cannot be blind to the fact that your housekeeper has, apparently, some strong reason of her own for viewing Mrs. Noel Vanstone with an enmity and distrust, which we are quite ready to believe that lady has done nothing to deserve. Whatever strange misunderstanding there may have been in your household, is your business (if you choose to keep it to yourself), and not ours. All we have any right to do, is to tell you what the doctor says. His patient has been delirious; he declines to answer for her life if she goes on as she is going on now; and he thinks—finding that she is perpetually talking of her master—that your presence would be useful in quieting her, if you could come here at once, and exert your influence before it is too late.

“What do you say? Will you emerge from the darkness that surrounds you, and come to St. Crux? If this was the case of an ordinary servant, I could understand your hesitating to leave the delights of your honeymoon for any such object as is here proposed to you. But, my dear fellow, Mrs. Lécourt is not an ordinary servant. You are under obligations to her fidelity and attachment, in your father’s time, as well as in your own; and if you *can* quiet the anxieties which seem to be driving this unfortunate woman mad, I really think you ought to come here and do so. Your leaving Mrs. Noel Vanstone is of course out of the question. There is no necessity for any such hard-hearted proceeding. The admiral desires me to remind you that he is your oldest friend living, and that his

house is at your wife's disposal, as it has always been at yours. In this great rambling place she need dread no near association with the sick-room ; and, with all my uncle's oddities, I am sure she will not think the offer of his friendship an offer to be despised.

"Have I told you already that I went to Aldborough to try and find a clue to your whereabouts? I can't be at the trouble of looking back to see ; so, if I have told you, I tell you again. The truth is, I made an acquaintance at Aldborough of whom you know something—at least, by report.

"After applying vainly at Sea View, I went to the hotel to inquire about you. The landlady could give me no information ; but the moment I mentioned your name, she asked if I was related to you—and when I told her I was your cousin, she said there was a young lady then at the hotel, whose name was Vanstone also ; who was in great distress about a missing relative ; and who might prove of some use to me—or I to her—if we knew of each other's errand at Aldborough. I had not the least idea who she was ; but I sent in my card at a venture ; and, in five minutes afterwards, I found myself in the presence of one of the most charming women these eyes ever looked on.

"Our first words of explanation informed me that my family name was known to her by repute. Who do you think she was? The eldest daughter of my uncle and yours—Andrew Vanstone. I had often heard my poor mother, in past years, speak of her brother Andrew ; and I knew of that sad story at

Combe-Raven. But our families, as you are aware, had always been estranged ; and I had never seen my charming cousin before. She has the dark eyes and hair, and the gentle retiring manners that I always admire in a woman. I don't want to renew our old disagreement about your father's conduct to those two sisters, or to deny that his brother Andrew may have behaved badly to him—I am willing to admit that the high moral position he took in the matter is quite unassailable by such a miserable sinner as I am—and I will not dispute that my own spendthrift habits incapacitate me from offering any opinion on the conduct of other people's pecuniary affairs. But, with all these allowances and drawbacks, I can tell you one thing, Noel. If you ever see the elder Miss Vanstone, I venture to prophecy that, for the first time in your life, you will doubt the propriety of following your father's example.

“ She told me her little story, poor thing, most simply and unaffectedly. She is now occupying her second situation as a governess—and, as usual, I, who know everybody, know the family. They are friends of my uncle's, whom he has lost sight of latterly—the Tyrrels of Portland Place—and they treat Miss Vanstone with as much kindness and consideration as if she was a member of the family. One of their old servants accompanied her to Aldborough ; her object in travelling to that place being what the landlady of the hotel had stated it to be. The family reverses have, it seems, had a serious effect on Miss Vanstone's younger sister,

who has left her friends, and who has been missing from home for some time. She had been last heard of at Aldborough; and her elder sister, on her return from the Continent with the Tyrrels, had instantly set out to make inquiries at that place.

“This was all Miss Vanstone told me. She asked whether you had seen anything of her sister, or whether Mrs. Lecount knew anything of her sister—I suppose because she was aware you had been at Aldborough. Of course I could tell her nothing. She entered into no details on the subject, and I could not presume to ask her for any. All I did was to set to work with might and main to assist her inquiries. The attempt was an utter failure—nobody could give us any information. We tried personal description of course; and, strange to say, the only young lady formerly staying at Aldborough, who answered the description, was, of all the people in the world, the lady you have married! If she had not had an uncle and aunt (both of whom have left the place), I should have begun to suspect that you had married your cousin without knowing it! Is this the clue to the mystery? Don’t be angry; I must have my little joke, and I can’t help writing as carelessly as I talk. The end of it was, our inquiries were all baffled, and I travelled back with Miss Vanstone and her attendant, as far as our station here. I think I shall call on the Tyrrels, when I am next in London. I have certainly treated that family with the most inexcusable neglect.

“Here I am at the end of my third sheet of note

paper! I don't often take the pen in hand; but when I do, you will agree with me, that I am in no hurry to lay it aside again. Treat the rest of my letter as you like—but consider what I have told you about Mrs. Lecount, and remember that time is of consequence.

“Ever yours,

“GEORGE BARTRAM.”

II.

FROM NORAH VANSTONE TO MISS GARTH.

Portland Place.

“MY DEAR MISS GARTH,

“More sorrow, more disappointment! I have just returned from Aldborough, without making any discovery. Magdalen is still lost to us.

“I cannot attribute this new overthrow of my hopes to any want of perseverance or penetration in making the necessary inquiries. My inexperience in such matters was most kindly and unexpectedly assisted by Mr. George Bartram. By a strange coincidence, he happened to be at Aldborough, inquiring after Mr. Noel Vanstone, at the very time when I was there inquiring after Magdalen. He sent in his card, and knowing when I looked at the name, that he was my cousin—if I may call him so—I thought there would be no impropriety in my seeing him, and asking his advice. I abstained from entering into particulars, for Magdalen's sake; and I made no allusion to that letter of Mrs. Lecount's which you answered for me.

I only told him Magdalen was missing, and had been last heard of at Aldborough. The kindness which he showed in devoting himself to my assistance, exceeds all description. He treated me, in my forlorn situation, with a delicacy and respect, which I shall remember gratefully, long after he has himself perhaps forgotten our meeting altogether. He is quite young—not more than thirty, I should think. In face and figure, he reminded me a little of the portrait of my father at Combe-Raven—I mean the portrait in the dining-room, of my father when he was a young man.

“Useless as our inquiries were, there is one result of them which has left a very strange and shocking impression on my mind.

“It appears that Mr. Noel Vanstone has lately married, under mysterious circumstances, a young lady whom he met with at Aldborough, named Bygrave. He has gone away with his wife, telling nobody but his lawyer where he has gone to. This I heard from Mr. George Bartram, who was endeavouring to trace him, for the purpose of communicating the news of his housekeeper’s serious illness—the housekeeper being the same Mrs. Lecount whose letter you answered. So far, you may say, there is nothing which need particularly interest either of us. But I think you will be as much surprised as I was, when I tell you that the description given by the people at Aldborough of Miss Bygrave’s appearance, is most startlingly and unaccountably like the description of Magdalen’s appearance. This discovery, taken in connection with

all the circumstances we know of, has had an effect on my mind, which I cannot describe to you—which I dare not realize to myself. Pray come and see me! I have never felt so wretched about Magdalen as I feel now. Suspense must have weakened my nerves in some strange way. I feel superstitious about the slightest things. This accidental resemblance of a total stranger to Magdalen, fills me, every now and then, with the most horrible misgivings—merely because Mr. Noel Vanstone's name happens to be mixed up with it. Once more, pray come to me—I have so much to say to you that I cannot, and dare not, say in writing.

“Gratefully and affectionately yours,

“NORAH.”

III.

FROM MR. JOHN LOSCOMBE (SOLICITOR) TO
GEORGE BARTRAM, ESQ.

“Lincoln's Inn, London.

“September 6th, 1847.

“SIR,

“I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your note, enclosing a letter addressed to my client, Mr. Noel Vanstone, and requesting that I will forward the same to Mr. Vanstone's present address.

“Since I last had the pleasure of communicating with you on this subject, my position towards my client is entirely altered. Three days ago, I received a letter from him which stated his intention of changing

his place of residence on the next day then ensuing, but which left me entirely in ignorance on the subject of the locality to which it was his intention to remove. I have not heard from him since ; and, as he had previously drawn on me for a larger sum of money than usual, there would be no present necessity for his writing to me again—assuming that it is his wish to keep his place of residence concealed from every one, myself included.

“Under these circumstances, I think it right to return you your letter, with the assurance that I will let you know, if I happen to be again placed in a position to forward it to its destination.

“Your obedient servant,

“JOHN LOSCOMBE.”

IV.

FROM NORAH VANSTONE TO MISS GARTH.

“Portland Place.

“MY DEAR MISS GARTH,

“Forget the letter I wrote to you yesterday, and all the gloomy forebodings that it contains. This morning’s post has brought new life to me. I have just received a letter, addressed to me at your house, and forwarded here, in your absence from home yesterday, by your sister. Can you guess who the writer is? —Magdalen !

“The letter is very short ; it seems to have been written in a hurry. She says she has been dreaming

of me for some nights past, and the dreams have made her fear that her long silence has caused me more distress, on her account, than she is worth. She writes therefore to assure me that she is safe and well—that she hopes to see me before long—and that she has something to tell me, when we meet, which will try my sisterly love for her as nothing has tried it yet. The letter is not dated ; but the postmark is “Allonby,” which I have found on referring to the *Gazetteer*, to be a little sea-side place in Cumberland. There is no hope of my being able to write back—for Magdalen expressly says that she is on the eve of departure from her present residence, and that she is not at liberty to say where she is going to next, or to leave instructions for forwarding any letters after her.

“In happier times, I should have thought this letter very far from being a satisfactory one—and I should have been seriously alarmed by that allusion to a future confidence on her part which will try my love for her as nothing has tried it yet. But, after all the suspense I have suffered, the happiness of seeing her handwriting again seems to fill my heart, and to keep all other feelings out of it. I don’t send you her letter, because I know you are coming to me soon, and I want to have the pleasure of seeing you read it.

“Ever affectionately yours,

“NORAH.

“P.S. Mr. George Bartram called on Mrs. Tyrrel to-day. He insisted on being introduced to the chil-

dren. When he was gone, Mrs. Tyrrel laughed in her good-humoured way, and said that his anxiety to see the children, looked to her mind, very much like an anxiety to see *me*. You may imagine how my spirits are improved, when I can occupy my pen in writing such nonsense as this !”

V.

FROM MRS. LECOUNT TO MR. DE BLERIOT, GENERAL AGENT, LONDON.

“St. Crux, October 23rd, 1847.

“DEAR SIR,

“I have been long in thanking you for the kind letter which promises me your assistance, in friendly remembrance of the commercial relations formerly existing between my brother and yourself. The truth is, I have overtaken my strength on my recovery from a long and dangerous illness ; and for the last ten days I have been suffering under a relapse. I am now better again, and able to enter on the business which you so kindly offer to undertake for me.

“The person whose present place of abode it is of the utmost importance to me to discover, is Mr. Noel Vanstone. I have lived, for many years past, in this gentleman’s service as housekeeper ; and not having received my formal dismissal, I consider myself in his service still. During my absence on the Continent, he was privately married at Aldborough, in Suffolk, on the eighteenth of August last. He left Aldborough

the same day ; taking his wife with him to some place of retreat which was kept a secret from everybody, except his lawyer, Mr. Loscombe, of Lincoln's Inn. After a short time he again removed, on the 4th of September, without informing Mr. Loscombe, on this occasion, of his new place of abode. From that date to this, the lawyer has remained (or has pretended to remain) in total ignorance of where he now is. Application has been made to Mr. Loscombe, under the circumstances, to mention what that former place of residence was, of which Mr. Vanstone is known to have informed him. Mr. Loscombe has declined acceding to this request, for want of formal permission to disclose his client's proceedings after leaving Aldborough. I have all these latter particulars from Mr. Loscombe's correspondent—the nephew of the gentleman who owns this house, and whose charity has given me an asylum, during the heavy affliction of my sickness, under his own roof.

“I believe the reasons which have induced Mr. Noel Vanstone to keep himself and his wife in hiding, are reasons which relate entirely to myself. In the first place, he is aware that the circumstances under which he has married, are such as to give me the right of regarding him with a just indignation. In the second place, he knows that my faithful services, rendered through a period of twenty years, to his father and to himself, forbid him, in common decency, to cast me out helpless on the world, without a provision for the end of my life. He is the meanest of living men, and

his wife is the vilest of living women. As long as he can avoid fulfilling his obligations to me, he will ; and his wife's encouragement may be trusted to fortify him in his ingratitude.

"My object in determining to find him out, is briefly this. His marriage has exposed him to consequences which a man of ten times his courage could not face without shrinking. Of those consequences he knows nothing. His wife knows, and keeps him in ignorance. I know, and can enlighten him. His security from the danger that threatens him, is in my hands alone ; and he shall pay the price of his rescue, to the last farthing of the debt that justice claims for me as my due—no more and no less.

"I have now laid my mind before you, as you told me, without reserve. You know why I want to find this man, and what I mean to do when I find him. I leave it to your sympathy for me, to answer the serious question that remains : How is the discovery to be made ? If a first trace of them can be found, after their departure from Aldborough, I believe careful inquiry will suffice for the rest. The personal appearance of the wife, and the extraordinary contrast between her husband and herself, are certain to be remarked, and remembered, by every stranger who sees them.

"When you favour me with your answer, please address it to 'Care of Admiral Bartram, St. Crux-in-the Marsh, near Ossory, Essex.

"Your much obliged,

"VIRGINIE LECOUNT."

VI.

FROM MR. DE BLERHOT TO MRS. LECOUNT.

“Dark’s Buildings, Kingsland,

“October 25th, 1847.

“Private and Confidential.

“DEAR MADAM,

“I hasten to reply to your favour of Saturday’s date. Circumstances have enabled me to forward your interests, by consulting a friend of mine, possessing great experience in the management of private inquiries of all sorts. I have placed your case before him (without mentioning names); and I am happy to inform you that my views and his views of the proper course to take, agree in every particular.

“Both myself and friend, then, are of opinion that little or nothing can be done towards tracing the parties you mention, until the place of their temporary residence after they left Aldborough, has been discovered first. If this can be done, the sooner it is done the better. Judging from your letter, some weeks must have passed since the lawyer received his information that they had shifted their quarters. As they are both remarkable-looking people, the strangers who may have assisted them on their travels have probably not forgotten them yet. Nevertheless, expedition is desirable.

“The question for you to consider is, whether they may not possibly have communicated the address of which we stand in need, to some other person besides

the lawyer. The husband may have written to members of his family, or the wife may have written to members of her family. Both myself and friend are of opinion that the latter chance is the likeliest of the two. If you have any means of access in the direction of the wife's family, we strongly recommend you to make use of them. If not, please supply us with the names of any of her near relations or intimate female friends whom you know, and we will endeavour to get access for you.

“In any case, we request you will at once favour us with the most exact personal description that can be written of both the parties. We may require your assistance, in this important particular, at five minutes' notice. Favour us, therefore, with the description by return of post. In the mean time, we will endeavour to ascertain, on our side, whether any information is to be privately obtained at Mr. Loscombe's office. The lawyer himself is probably altogether beyond our reach. But if any one of his clerks can be advantageously treated with, on such terms as may not overtax your pecuniary resources, accept my assurance that the opportunity shall be made the most of, by,

“Dear Madam,

“Your faithful servant,

“ALFRED DE BLERIOT.”

VII.

FROM MR. PENDRIL TO NORAH VANSTONE.

“Searle Street, October 27th, 1847.

“MY DEAR MISS VANSTONE,

“A lady, named Lecount (formerly attached to Mr. Noel Vanstone’s service, in the capacity of house-keeper), has called at my office this morning, and has asked me to furnish her with your address. I have begged her to excuse my immediate compliance with her request, and to favour me with a call to-morrow morning, when I shall be prepared to meet her with a definite answer.

“My hesitation in this matter does not proceed from any distrust of Mrs. Lecount personally—for I know nothing whatever to her prejudice. But in making her request to me, she stated that the object of the desired interview was to speak to you privately on the subject of your sister. Forgive me for acknowledging that I determined to withhold the address, as soon as I heard this. You will make allowances for your old friend and your sincere well-wisher? You will not take it amiss, if I express my strong disapproval of your allowing yourself on any pretence whatever, to be mixed up for the future with your sister’s proceedings.

“I will not distress you by saying more than this. But I feel too deep an interest in your welfare, and too sincere an admiration of the patience with which you have borne all your trials, to say less.

“If I cannot prevail on you to follow my advice, you have only to say so, and Mrs. Lecount shall have your address to-morrow. In this case (which I cannot contemplate without the greatest unwillingness), let me at least recommend you to stipulate that Miss Garth shall be present at the interview. In any matter with which your sister is concerned, you may want an old friend’s advice and an old friend’s protection against your own generous impulses. If I could have helped you in this way, I would—but Mrs. Lecount gave me indirectly to understand that the subject to be discussed was of too delicate a nature to permit of my presence. Whatever this objection may be really worth, it cannot apply to Miss Garth, who has brought you both up from childhood. I say, again, therefore, if you see Mrs. Lecount, see her in Miss Garth’s company.

“Always most truly yours,

“WILLIAM PENDRIL.”

VIII.

FROM NORAH VANSTONE TO MR. PENDRIL.

“Portland Place, Wednesday.

“DEAR MR. PENDRIL,

“Pray don’t think I am ungrateful for your kindness. Indeed, indeed I am not! But I must see Mrs. Lecount. You were not aware when you wrote to me, that I had received a few lines from Magdalen—not telling me where she is, but holding out the hope of our meeting before long. Perhaps Mrs.

Lecount may have something to say to me, on this very subject? Even if it should not be so, my sister—do what she may—is still my sister. I can't desert her; I can't turn my back on any one who comes to me in her name. You know, dear Mr. Pendril, I have always been obstinate on this subject; and you have always borne with me. Let me owe another obligation to you which I can never return—and bear with me still!

“Need I say that I willingly accept that part of your advice which refers to Miss Garth? I have already written to beg that she will come here at four, to-morrow afternoon. When you see Mrs. Lecount, please inform her that Miss Garth will be with me, and that she will find us both ready to receive her here, to-morrow, at four o'clock.

“Gratefully yours,

“NORAH VANSTONE.”

IX.

FROM MR. DE BLERIOT TO MRS. LECOUNT.

“Dark's Buildings, October 28th.

“Private.

“DEAR MADAM,

“One of Mr. Loscombe's clerks has proved amenable to a small pecuniary consideration, and has mentioned a circumstance which it may be of some importance to you to know.

“Nearly a month since, accident gave the clerk in

question an opportunity of looking into one of the documents on his master's table, which had attracted his attention from a slight peculiarity in the form and colour of the paper. He had only time, during Mr. Loscombe's momentary absence, to satisfy his curiosity by looking at the beginning of the document, and at the end. At the beginning, he saw the customary form used in making a will. At the end, he discovered the signature of Mr. Noel Vanstone ; with the names of two attesting witnesses, and the date (of which he is quite certain)—*the thirtieth of September last*.

“Before the clerk had time to make any further investigations, his master returned, sorted the papers on the table, and carefully locked up the will, in the strong box devoted to the custody of Mr. Noel Vanstone's documents. It has been ascertained that, at the close of September, Mr. Loscombe was absent from the office. If he was then employed in superintending the execution of his client's will—which is quite possible—it follows clearly that he was in the secret of Mr. Vanstone's address, after the removal of the 4th of September ; and if you can do nothing on your side, it may be desirable to have the lawyer watched on ours. In any case, it is certainly ascertained that Mr. Noel Vanstone has made his will, since his marriage. I leave you to draw your own conclusions from that fact, and remain, in the hope of hearing from you shortly,

“Your faithful servant,

“ALFRED DE BLERIOT.”

X.

FROM MISS GARTH TO MR. PENDRIL.

“Portland Place, October 28th.

“MY DEAR SIR,

“Mrs. Lecount has just left us. If it was not too late to wish, I should wish from the bottom of my heart, that Norah had taken your advice, and had refused to see her.

“I write in such distress of mind, that I cannot hope to give you a clear and complete account of the interview. I can only tell you briefly what Mrs. Lecount has done, and what our situation now is. The rest must be left until I am more composed, and until I can speak to you personally.

“You will remember my informing you of the letter which Mrs. Lecount addressed to Norah from Aldborough, and which I answered for her in her absence. When Mrs. Lecount made her appearance to-day, her first words announced to us that she had come to renew the subject. As well as I can remember it, this is what she said, addressing herself to Norah :

““I wrote to you on the subject of your sister, Miss Vanstone, some little time since ; and Miss Garth was so good as to answer the letter. What I feared at that time has come true. Your sister has defied all my efforts to check her ; she has disappeared in company with my master, Mr. Noel Vanstone ; and she is now in a position of danger, which may lead to her disgrace and ruin at a moment’s notice. It is my interest to

recover my master; it is your interest to save your sister. Tell me—for time is precious—have you any news of her?

“Norah answered, as well as her terror and distress would allow her, ‘I have had a letter, but there was no address on it.’

“Mrs. Lecount asked, ‘Was there no postmark on the envelope?’

“Norah said—‘Yes; Allonby.’

“‘Allonby is better than nothing,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘Allonby may help you to trace her. Where is Allonby?’

“Norah told her. It all passed in a minute. I had been too much confused and startled to interfere before; but I composed myself sufficiently to interfere now.

“‘You have entered into no particulars,’ I said. ‘You have only frightened us—you have told us nothing.’

“‘You shall hear the particulars, ma’am,’ said Mrs. Lecount; ‘and you and Miss Vanstone shall judge for yourselves, if I have frightened you without a cause.’

“Upon this, she entered at once upon a long narrative, which I cannot—I might almost say, which I dare not—repeat. You will understand the horror we both felt, when I tell you the end. If Mrs. Lecount’s statement is to be relied on, Magdalen has carried her mad resolution of recovering her father’s fortune, to the last and most desperate extremity—she has married Michael Vanstone’s son, under a false name. Her

husband is at this moment still persuaded that her maiden name was Bygrave, and that she is really the niece of a scoundrel who assisted her imposture, and whom I recognize by the description of him to have been Captain Wragge.

“I spare you Mrs. Lecount’s cool avowal, when she rose to leave us, of her own mercenary motives in wishing to discover her master and to enlighten him. I spare you the hints she dropped of Magdalen’s purpose in contracting this infamous marriage. The one aim and object of my letter is, to implore you to assist me in quieting Norah’s anguish of mind. The shock she has received at hearing this news of her sister, is not the worst result of what has happened. She has persuaded herself that the answers she innocently gave in her distress, to Mrs. Lecount’s questions on the subject of the letter—the answers wrung from her under the sudden pressure of confusion and alarm—may be used to Magdalen’s prejudice by the woman who purposely startled her into giving the information. I can only prevent her from taking some desperate step on her side—some step by which she may forfeit the friendship and protection of the excellent people with whom she is now living—by reminding her that if Mrs. Lecount traces her master by means of the post-mark on the letter, we may trace Magdalen at the same time, and by the same means. Whatever objection you may personally feel to renewing the efforts for the rescue of this miserable girl, which failed so lamentably at York, I entreat you for Norah’s sake, to take the same steps now which we

took then. Send me the only assurance which will quiet her—the assurance, under your own hand, that the search on our side has begun. If you will do this, you may trust me when the time comes, to stand between these two sisters, and to defend Norah's peace, character, and future prosperity, at any price.

“Most sincerely yours,

“HARRIET GARTH.”

XI.

FROM MRS. LECOUNT TO MR. DE BLERIoT.

“October 28th.

“DEAR SIR,

“I have found the trace you wanted. Mrs. Noel Vanstone has written to her sister. The letter contains no address; but the post-mark is Allonby, in Cumberland. From Allonby, therefore, the inquiries must begin. You have already in your possession the personal description of both husband and wife. I urgently recommend you not to lose one unnecessary moment. If it is possible to send to Cumberland immediately on receipt of this letter, I beg you will do so.

“I have another word to say before I close my note—a word about the discovery in Mr. Loscombe's office.

“It is no surprise to me, to hear that Mr. Noel Vanstone has made his will since his marriage; and I am at no loss to guess in whose favour the will is made.

If I succeed in finding my master—let that person get the money if that person can! A course to follow in this matter has presented itself to my mind, since I received your letter—but my ignorance of details of business and intricacies of law, leaves me still uncertain whether my idea is capable of ready and certain execution. I know no professional person whom I can trust in this delicate and dangerous business. Is your large experience in other matters, large enough to help me in this? I will call at your office to-morrow at two o'clock, for the purpose of consulting you on the subject. It is of the greatest importance, when I next see Mr. Noel Vanstone, that he should find me thoroughly prepared beforehand, in this matter of the will.

“Your much obliged servant,

“VIRGINIE LECOUNT.”

XII.

FROM MR. PENDRIL TO MISS GARTH.

“Searle Street, October 29th.

“DEAR MISS GARTH,

“I have only a moment to assure you of the sorrow with which I have read your letter. The circumstances under which you urge your request, and the reasons you give for making it, are sufficient to silence any objection I might otherwise feel to the course you propose. A trustworthy person, whom I have myself instructed, will start for Allonby to-day; and as soon as

I receive any news from him, you shall hear of it by special messenger. Tell Miss Vanstone this, and pray add the sincere expression of my sympathy and regard.

“Faithfully yours,

“WILLIAM PENDRIL.”

XIII.

FROM MR. DE BLERIOU TO MRS. LECOUNT.

“Dark’s Buildings, November 1st.

“DEAR MADAM,

“I have the pleasure of informing you that the discovery has been made, with far less trouble than I had anticipated.

“Mr. and Mrs. Noel Vanstone have been traced across the Solway Firth, to Dumfriës; and thence to a cottage, a few miles from the town, on the banks of the Nith. The exact address is, Baliol Cottage, near Dumfries.

“This information, though easily hunted up, has nevertheless been obtained under rather singular circumstances.

“Before leaving Allonby, the persons in my employ discovered, to their surprise, that a stranger was in the place pursuing the same inquiry as themselves. In the absence of any instructions preparing them for such an occurrence as this, they took their own view of the circumstance. Considering the man as an intruder on their business, whose success might deprive them of the

credit and reward of making the discovery, they took advantage of their superiority in numbers, and of their being first in the field, and carefully misled the stranger before they ventured any further with their own investigations. I am in possession of the details of their proceedings—with which I need not trouble you. The end is, that this person, whoever he may be, was cleverly turned back southward, on a false scent, before the men in my employment crossed the Firth.

“I mention the circumstance, as you may be better able than I am to find a clue to it, and as it may possibly be of a nature to induce you to hasten your journey.

“Your faithful servant,

“ALFRED DE BLERIOT.”

XIV.

FROM MRS. LECOUNT TO MR. DE BLERIOT.

“November 1st.

“DEAR SIR,

“One line to say that your letter has just reached me at my lodging in London. I think I know who sent the strange man to inquire at Allonby. It matters little. Before he finds out his mistake, I shall be at Dumfries. My luggage is packed—and I start for the North by the next train.

“Your deeply obliged,

“VIRGINIE LECOUNT.”

THE FIFTH SCENE.



BALIOLO COTTAGE, DUMFRIES.

THE FIFTH SCENE.



CHAPTER I.

TOWARDS eleven o'clock, on the morning of the third of November, the breakfast-table at Baliol Cottage presented that essentially comfortless appearance which is caused by a meal in a state of transition—that is to say, by a meal prepared for two persons, which has been already eaten by one, and which has not yet been approached by the other. It must be a hardy appetite which can contemplate without a momentary discouragement, the battered egg-shell, the fish half-stripped to a skeleton, the crumbs in the plate, and the dregs in the cup. There is surely a wise submission to those weaknesses in human nature which must be respected and not reprov'd, in the sympathizing rapidity with which servants in places of public refreshment, clear away all signs of the customer in the past, from the eyes of the customer in the present. Although his predecessor may have been the wife of his bosom or the child of his loins, no man can find

himself confronted at table by the traces of a vanished eater, without a passing sense of injury in connection with the idea of his own meal.

Some such impression as this found its way into the mind of Mr. Noel Vanstone, when he entered the lonely breakfast-parlour at Baliol Cottage, shortly after eleven o'clock. He looked at the table with a frown, and rang the bell with an expression of disgust.

"Clear away this mess," he said, when the servant appeared. "Has your mistress gone?"

"Yes, sir—nearly an hour ago."

"Is Louisa down-stairs?"

"Yes, sir."

"When you have put the table right, send Louisa up to me."

He walked away to the window. The momentary irritation passed away from his face; but it left an expression there which remained—an expression of pining discontent. Personally, his marriage had altered him for the worse. His wizen little cheeks were beginning to shrink into hollows; his frail little figure had already contracted a slight stoop. The former delicacy of his complexion had gone—the sickly paleness of it was all that remained. His thin flaxen moustachios were no longer pragmatically waxed and twisted into a curl: their weak feathery ends hung meekly pendent over the querulous corners of his mouth. If the ten or twelve weeks since his marriage had been counted by his looks, they might have reckoned as ten or twelve years. He stood at the window mechanically

picking leaves from a pot of heath placed in front of it, and drearily humming the forlorn fragment of a tune.

The prospect from the window overlooked the course of the Nith, at a bend of the river a few miles above Dumfries. Here and there, through wintry gaps in the wooded bank, broad tracts of the level cultivated valley met the eye. Boats passed on the river, and carts plodded along the high road on their way to Dumfries. The sky was clear; the November sun shone as pleasantly as if the year had been younger by two good months; and the view, noted in Scotland for its bright and peaceful charm, was presented at the best which its wintry aspect could assume. If it had been hidden in mist or drenched with rain, Mr. Noel Vanstone would, to all appearance, have found it as attractive as he found it now. He waited at the window until he heard Louisa's knock at the door—then turned back sullenly to the breakfast-table and told her to come in.

“Make the tea,” he said. “I know nothing about it. I'm left here neglected. Nobody helps me.”

The discreet Louisa silently and submissively obeyed.

“Did your mistress leave any message for me,” he asked, “before she went away?”

“No message in particular, sir. My mistress only said she should be too late if she waited breakfast any longer.”

“Did she say nothing else?”

"She told me at the carriage-door, sir, that she would most likely be back in a week."

"Was she in good spirits at the carriage door?"

"No, sir. I thought my mistress seemed very anxious and uneasy. Is there anything more I can do, sir?"

"I don't know. Wait a minute."

He proceeded discontentedly with his breakfast. Louisa waited resignedly at the door.

"I think your mistress has been in bad spirits, lately," he resumed, with a sudden outbreak of petulance.

"My mistress has not been very cheerful, sir."

"What do you mean by not very cheerful? Do you mean to prevaricate? Am I nobody in the house? Am I to be kept in the dark about everything? Is your mistress to go away on her own affairs, and leave me at home like a child—and am I not even to ask a question about her? Am I to be prevaricated with by a servant? I won't be prevaricated with! Not very cheerful? What do you mean by not very cheerful?"

"I only meant that my mistress was not in good spirits, sir."

"Why couldn't you say it then? Don't you know the value of words? The most dreadful consequences sometimes happen from not knowing the value of words. Did your mistress tell you she was going to London?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you think when your mistress told you she was going to London? Did you think it odd she was going without me?"

"I did not presume to think it odd, sir.—Is there

anything more I can do for you, if you please, sir?"

"What sort of morning is it out? Is it warm? Is the sun on the garden?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen the sun yourself on the garden?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get me my great-coat; I'll take a little turn. Has the man brushed it? Did you see the man brush it yourself? What do you mean by saying he has brushed it, when you didn't see him? Let me look at the tails. If there's a speck of dust on the tails, I'll turn the man off!—Help me on with it."

Louisa helped him on with his coat, and gave him his hat. He went out irritably. The coat was a large one (it had belonged to his father); the hat was a large one (it was a misfit purchased as a bargain by himself). He was submerged in his hat and coat; he looked singularly small, and frail, and miserable, as he slowly wended his way, in the wintry sunlight, down the garden walk. The path sloped gently from the back of the house to the water-side, from which it was parted by a low wooden fence. After pacing backwards and forwards slowly for some little time, he stopped at the lower extremity of the garden; and leaning on the fence, looked down listlessly at the smooth flow of the river.

His thoughts still ran on the subject of his first fretful question to Louisa—he was still brooding over the circumstances under which his wife had left the

cottage that morning, and over the want of consideration towards himself, implied in the manner of her departure. The longer he thought of his grievance, the more acutely he resented it. He was capable of great tenderness of feeling, where any injury to his sense of his own importance was concerned. His head drooped little by little on his arms, as they rested on the fence ; and, in the deep sincerity of his mortification, he sighed bitterly.

The sigh was answered by a voice close at his side.

“You were happier with *me*, sir,” said the voice in accents of tender regret.

He looked up with a scream—literally with a scream—and confronted Mrs. Lecount.

Was it the spectre of the woman ? or the woman herself ? Her hair was white ; her face had fallen away ; her eyes looked out large, bright, and haggard over her hollow cheeks. She was withered and old. Her dress hung loose round her wasted figure ; not a trace of its buxom autumnal beauty remained. The quietly impenetrable resolution, the smoothly insinuating voice—these were the only relics of the past which sickness and suffering had left in Mrs. Lecount.

“Compose yourself, Mr. Noel,” she said, gently. “You have no cause to be alarmed at seeing me. Your servant, when I inquired, said you were in the garden ; and I came here to find you. I have traced you out, sir, with no resentment against yourself, with no wish to distress you by so much as the shadow of a

reproach. I come here, on what has been, and is still, the business of my life—your service.”

He recovered himself a little ; but he was still incapable of speech. He held fast by the fence, and stared at her.

“Try to possess your mind, sir, of what I say,” proceeded Mrs. Lecount. “I have not come here as your enemy, but as your friend. I have been tried by sickness ; I have been tried by distress. Nothing remains of me, but my heart. My heart forgives you ; my heart, in your sore need—need which you have yet to feel—places me at your service. Take my arm, Mr. Noel. A little turn in the sun will help you to recover yourself.”

She put his hand through her arm, and marched him slowly up the garden-walk. Before she had been five minutes in his company, she had resumed full possession of him, in her own right.

“Now down again, Mr. Noel,” she said. “Gently down again, in this fine sunlight. I have much to say to you, sir, which you never expected to hear from me. Let me ask a little domestic question first. They told me, at the house door, Mrs. Noel Vanstone was gone away on a journey. Has she gone for long?”

Her master’s hand trembled on her arm, as she put that question. Instead of answering it, he tried faintly to plead for himself. The first words that escaped him were prompted by his first returning sense—the sense that his housekeeper had taken him into custody. He tried to make his peace with Mrs. Lecount.

“I always meant to do something for you,” he said,

coaxingly. "You would have heard from me, before long. Upon my word and honour, Lecount, you would have heard from me, before long!"

"I don't doubt it, sir," replied Mrs. Lecount. "But for the present, never mind about Me. You, and your interests first."

"How did you come here?" he asked, looking at her in astonishment. "How came you to find me out?"

"It is a long story, sir; I will tell it you some other time. Let it be enough to say now, that I *have* found you. Will Mrs. Noel be back again at the house to-day? A little louder, sir; I can hardly hear you. So! so! Not back again for a week! And where is she gone? To London, did you say? And what for?—I am not inquisitive, Mr. Noel; I am asking serious questions, under serious necessity. Why has your wife left you here, and gone to London by herself?"

They were down at the fence again as she made that last inquiry; and they waited, leaning against it, while Noel Vanstone answered. Her reiterated assurances that she bore him no malice were producing their effect; he was beginning to recover himself. The old helpless habit of addressing all his complaints to his housekeeper, was returning already with the reappearance of Mrs. Lecount—returning insidiously, in company with that besetting anxiety to talk about his grievances, which had got the better of him at the breakfast-table, and which had shown the wound inflicted on his vanity to his wife's maid.

“I can’t answer for Mrs. Noel Vanstone,” he said, spitefully. “Mrs. Noel Vanstone has not treated me with the consideration which is my due. She has taken my permission for granted; and she has only thought proper to tell me that the object of her journey is to see her friends in London. She went away this morning, without bidding me good-bye. She takes her own way, as if I was nobody; she treats me like a child. You may not believe it, Lecount—but I don’t even know who her friends are. I am left quite in the dark—I am left to guess for myself that her friends in London are her uncle and aunt.”

Mrs. Lecount privately considered the question by the help of her own knowledge, obtained in London. She soon reached the obvious conclusion. After writing to her sister in the first instance, Magdalen had now in all probability, followed the letter in person. There was little doubt that the friends she had gone to visit in London, were her sister and Miss Garth.

“Not her uncle and aunt, sir,” resumed Mrs. Lecount, composedly. “A secret for your private ear! She has no uncle and aunt. Another little turn before I explain myself—another little turn to compose your spirits.”

She took him into custody once more; and marched him back towards the house.

“Mr. Noel!” she said, suddenly stopping in the middle of the walk. “Do you know what was the worst mischief you ever did yourself in your life? I

will tell you. That worst mischief was sending me to Zurich."

His hand began to tremble on her arm once more.

"I didn't do it!" he cried piteously. "It was all Mr. Bygrave."

"You acknowledge, sir, that Mr. Bygrave deceived *me*?" proceeded Mrs. Lecount. "I am glad to hear that. You will be all the readier to make the next discovery which is waiting for you—the discovery that Mr. Bygrave has deceived *you*. He is not here to slip through my fingers now; and I am not the helpless woman in this place that I was at Aldborough. Thank God!"

She uttered that devout exclamation through her set teeth. All her hatred of Captain Wragge hissed out of her lips in those two words.

"Oblige me, sir, by holding one side of my travelling-bag," she resumed, "while I open it and take something out."

The interior of the bag disclosed a series of neatly-folded papers, all laid together in order, and numbered outside. Mrs. Lecount took out one of the papers, and shut up the bag again with a loud snap of the spring that closed it.

"At Aldborough, Mr. Noel, I had only my own opinion to support me," she remarked. "My own opinion was nothing against Miss Bygrave's youth and beauty, and Mr. Bygrave's ready wit. I could only hope to attack your infatuation with proofs—and at that time I had not got them. I have got them now!

I am armed at all points with proofs—I bristle from head to foot with proofs—I break my forced silence, and speak with the emphasis of my proofs. Do you know this writing, sir?”

He shrank back from the paper which she offered to him.

“I don’t understand this,” he said nervously. “I don’t know what you want or what you mean.”

Mrs. Lecount forced the paper into his hand. “You shall know what I mean, sir, if you will give me a moment’s attention,” she said. “On the day after you went away to St. Crux, I obtained admission to Mr. Bygrave’s house, and I had some talk in private with Mr. Bygrave’s wife. That talk supplied me with the means to convince you which I had wanted to find for weeks and weeks past. I wrote you a letter to say so—I wrote to tell you, that I would forfeit my place in your service, and my expectations from your generosity, if I did not prove to you when I came back from Switzerland, that my own private suspicion of Miss Bygrave was the truth. I directed that letter to you at St. Crux, and I posted it myself. Now, Mr. Noel, read the paper which I have forced into your hand. It is Admiral Bartram’s written affirmation, that my letter came to St. Crux, and that he enclosed it to you, under cover to Mr. Bygrave, at your own request. Did Mr. Bygrave ever give you that letter? Don’t agitate yourself, sir! One word of reply will do—Yes? or No?”

He read the paper, and looked up at her with

growing bewilderment and fear. She obstinately waited until he spoke. "No," he said faintly; "I never got the letter."

"First proof!" said Mrs. Lecount, taking the paper from him, and putting it back in the bag. "One more, with your kind permission, before we come to things more serious still. I gave you a written description, sir, at Aldborough, of a person not named; and I asked you to compare it with Miss Bygrave, the next time you were in her company. After having first shown the description to Mr. Bygrave—it is useless to deny it now, Mr. Noel; your friend at North Shingles is not here to help you!—after having first shown my note to Mr. Bygrave, you made the comparison; and you found it fail in the most important particular. There were two little moles placed close together on the left side of the neck, in my description of the unknown lady, and there were no little moles at all when you looked at Miss Bygrave's neck. I am old enough to be your mother, Mr. Noel. If the question is not indelicate—may I ask what the present state of your knowledge is, on the subject of your wife's neck?"

She looked at him with a merciless steadiness. He drew back a few steps, cowering under her eye. "I can't say," he stammered. "I don't know. What do you mean by these questions? I never thought about the moles afterwards; I never looked. She wears her hair low——"

"She has excellent reasons to wear it low, sir,"

remarked Mrs. Lecount. "We will try and lift that hair, before we have done with the subject. When I came out here to find you in the garden, I saw a neat young person, through the kitchen window, with her work in her hand, who looked to my eyes, like a lady's maid. Is this young person your wife's maid? I beg your pardon, sir, did you say yes? In that case, another question, if you please. Did you engage her, or did your wife?"

"I engaged her——"

"While I was away? While I was in total ignorance that you meant to have a wife, or a wife's maid."

"Yes."

"Under those circumstances, Mr. Noel, you cannot possibly suspect me of conspiring to deceive you, with the maid for my instrument. Go into the house, sir, while I wait here. Ask the woman who dresses Mrs. Noel Vanstone's hair, morning and night, whether her mistress has a mark on the left side of her neck, and (if so) what that mark is?"

He walked a few steps towards the house, without uttering a word, then stopped, and looked back at Mrs. Lecount. His blinking eyes were steady, and his wizen face had become suddenly composed. Mrs. Lecount advanced a little and joined him. She saw the change; but, with all her experience of him, she failed to interpret the true meaning of it.

"Are you in want of a pretence, sir?" she asked. "Are you at a loss to account to your wife's maid for such a question as I wish you to put to her? Pre-

tences are easily found, which will do for persons in her station of life. Say I have come here, with news of a legacy for Mrs. Noel Vanstone, and that there is a question of her identity to settle, before she can receive the money."

She pointed to the house. He paid no attention to the sign. His face grew paler and paler. Without moving or speaking, he stood and looked at her.

"Are you afraid?" asked Mrs. Lecount.

Those words roused him; those words lit a spark of the fire of manhood in him, at last. He turned on her, like a sheep on a dog.

"I won't be questioned and ordered!" he broke out, trembling violently under the new sensation of his own courage. "I won't be threatened and mystified any longer! How did you find me out at this place? What do you mean by coming here with your hints and your mysteries? What have you got to say against my wife?"

Mrs. Lecount composedly opened the travelling-bag, and took out her smelling-bottle, in case of emergency.

"You have spoken to me in plain words," she said. "In plain words, sir, you shall have your answer. Are you too angry to listen?"

Her looks and tones alarmed him, in spite of himself. His courage began to sink again; and, desperately as he tried to steady it, his voice trembled when he answered her.

"Give me my answer," he said. "and give it at once."

“Your commands shall be obeyed, sir, to the letter,” replied Mrs. Lecount. “I have come here with two objects. To open your eyes to your own situation; and to save your fortune—perhaps your life. Your situation is this. Miss Bygrave has married you, under a false character and a false name. Can you rouse your memory? Can you call to mind the disguised woman who threatened you in Vauxhall Walk? That woman—as certainly as I stand here—is now your wife.”

He looked at her in breathless silence. His lips falling apart; his eyes fixed in vacant inquiry. The suddenness of the disclosure had over-reached its own end. It had stupefied him.

“My wife?” he repeated—and burst into an imbecile laugh.

“Your wife,” reiterated Mrs. Lecount.

At the repetition of those two words, the strain on his faculties relaxed. A thought dawned on him for the first time. His eyes fixed on her with a furtive alarm, and he drew back hastily. “Mad!” he said to himself, with a sudden remembrance of what his friend Mr. Bygrave had told him at Aldborough; sharpened by his own sense of the haggard change that he saw in her face.

He spoke in a whisper—but Mrs. Lecount heard him. She was close at his side again, in an instant. For the first time, her self-possession failed her; and she caught him angrily by the arm.

“Will you put my madness to the proof, sir?” she asked.

He shook off her hold ; he began to gather courage again, in the intense sincerity of his disbelief—courage to face the assertion which she persisted in forcing on him.

“ Yes,” he answered. “ What must I do ? ”

“ Do what I told you,” said Mrs. Lecount. “ Ask the maid that question about her mistress, on the spot. And, if she tells you the mark is there, do one thing more. Take me up into your wife’s room, and open her wardrobe in my presence, with your own hands.”

“ What do you want with her wardrobe ? ” he asked.

“ You shall know when you open it.”

“ Very strange ! ” he said to himself, vacantly. “ It’s like a scene in a novel—it’s like nothing in real life.”

He went slowly into the house ; and Mrs. Lecount waited for him in the garden.

After an absence of a few minutes only, he appeared again, on the top of the flight of steps which led into the garden from the house. He held by the iron rail, with one hand ; while with the other he beckoned to Mrs. Lecount to join him on the steps.

“ What does the maid say ? ” she asked as she approached him. “ Is the mark there ? ”

He answered in a whisper, “ Yes.” What he had heard from the maid had produced a marked change in him. The horror of the coming discovery had laid its paralyzing hold on his mind. He moved mechanically ; he looked and spoke like a man in a dream.

“ Will you take my arm, sir ? ”

He shook his head ; and, preceding her along the

passage and up the stairs, led the way into his wife's room. When she joined him, and locked the door, he stood passively waiting for his directions, without making any remark, without showing any external appearance of surprise. He had not removed either his hat or coat. Mrs. Lecount took them off for him. "Thank you," he said, with the docility of a well-trained child. "It's like a scene in a novel—it's like nothing in real life."

The bed-chamber was not very large, and the furniture was heavy and old fashioned. But evidences of Magdalen's natural taste and refinement were visible everywhere, in the little embellishments that graced and enlivened the aspect of the room. The perfume of dried rose-leaves hung fragrant on the cool air. Mrs. Lecount sniffed the perfume with a disparaging frown, and threw the window up to its full height. "Pah!" she said, with a shudder of virtuous disgust—"the atmosphere of deceit!"

She seated herself near the window. The wardrobe stood against the wall opposite, and the bed was at the side of the room on her right hand. "Open the wardrobe, Mr. Noel," she said. "I don't go near it. I touch nothing in it, myself. Take out the dresses with your own hand, and put them on the bed. Take them out one by one, until I tell you to stop."

He obeyed her. "I'll do it as well as I can," he said. "My hands are cold, and my head feels half asleep."

The dresses to be removed were not many—for

Magdalen had taken some of them away with her. After he had put two dresses on the bed, he was obliged to search in the inner recesses of the wardrobe, before he could find a third. When he produced it, Mrs. Lecount made a sign to him to stop. The end was reached already: he had found the brown alpaca dress.

"Lay it out on the bed, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "You will see a double flounce running round the bottom of it. Lift up the outer flounce, and pass the inner one through your fingers, inch by inch. If you come to a place where there is a morsel of the stuff missing, stop, and look up at me."

He passed the flounce slowly through his fingers, for a minute or more—then stopped and looked up. Mrs. Lecount produced her pocket-book, and opened it.

"Every word I now speak, sir, is of serious consequence to you and to me," she said. "Listen with your closest attention. When the woman calling herself Miss Garth came to see us in Vauxhall Walk, I knelt down behind the chair in which she was sitting, and I cut a morsel of stuff from the dress she wore, which might help me to know that dress, if I ever saw it again. I did this, while the woman's whole attention was absorbed in talking to you. The morsel of stuff has been kept in my pocket-book, from that time to this. See for yourself, Mr. Noel, if it fits the gap in that dress, which your own hands have just taken from your wife's wardrobe."

She rose, and handed him the fragment of stuff

across the bed. He put it into the vacant space in the flounce, as well as his trembling fingers would let him.

“Does it fit, sir?” asked Mrs. Lecount.

The dress dropped from his hands; and the deadly bluish pallor—which every doctor who attended him had warned his housekeeper to dread—overspread his face slowly. Mrs. Lecount had not reckoned on such an answer to her question as she now saw in his cheeks. She hurried round to him, with the smelling-bottle in her hand. He dropped to his knees, and caught at her dress with the grasp of a drowning man. “Save me!” he gasped, in a hoarse, breathless whisper. “Oh, Lecount, save me!”

“I promise to save you,” said Mrs. Lecount; “I am here with the means and the resolution to save you. Come away from this place—come nearer to the air.” She raised him as she spoke, and led him across the room to the window. “Do you feel the chill pain again on your left side?” she asked, with the first signs of alarm that she had shown yet. “Has your wife got any eau-de-cologne, any sal-volatile in her room? Don’t exhaust yourself by speaking—point to the place!”

He pointed to a little triangular cupboard, of old worm-eaten walnut-wood, fixed high in a corner of the room. Mrs. Lecount tried the door—it was locked.

As she made that discovery, she saw his head sink back gradually on the easy-chair in which she had placed him. The warning of the doctors in past years

—“If you ever let him faint, you let him die”—recurred to her memory, as if it had been spoken the day before. She looked at the cupboard again. In a recess under it, lay some ends of cord, placed there apparently for purposes of packing. Without an instant’s hesitation, she snatched up a morsel of cord; tied one end fast round the knob of the cupboard-door; and seizing the other end in both hands, pulled it suddenly with the exertion of her whole strength. The rotten wood gave way; the cupboard-doors flew open; and a heap of little trifles poured out noisily on the floor. Without stopping to notice the broken china and glass at her feet, she looked into the dark recesses of the cupboard, and saw the gleam of two glass bottles. One was put away at the extreme back of the shelf; the other was a little in advance, almost hiding it. She snatched them both out at once, and took them, one in each hand, to the window, where she could read their labels in the clearer light.

The bottle in her right hand was the first bottle she looked at. It was marked—*Sal-volatile*.

She instantly laid the other bottle aside on the table without looking at it. The other bottle lay there, waiting its turn. It held a dark liquid, and it was labelled—POISON.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. LECOUNT mixed the sal-volatile with water, and administered it immediately. The stimulant had its effect. In a few minutes, Noel Vanstone was able to raise himself in the chair without assistance: his colour changed again for the better, and his breath came and went more freely.

“How do you feel now, sir?” asked Mrs. Lecount.
“Are you warm again, on your left side?”

He paid no attention to that inquiry: his eyes, wandering about the room, turned by chance, towards the table. To Mrs. Lecount's surprise, instead of answering her, he bent forward in his chair, and looked with staring eyes and pointing hand at the second bottle which she had taken from the cupboard, and which she had hastily laid aside, without paying attention to it. Seeing that some new alarm possessed him, she advanced to the table, and looked where he looked. The labelled side of the bottle was full in view; and there, in the plain handwriting of the chemist at Aldborough, was the one startling word, confronting them both—“Poison.”

Even Mrs. Lecount's self-possession was shaken by

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that discovery. She was not prepared to see her own darkest forebodings—the unacknowledged offspring of her hatred for Magdalen—realized as she saw them realized now. The suicide-despair in which the poison had been procured ; the suicide-purpose for which, in distrust of the future, the poison had been kept, had brought with them their own retribution. There the bottle lay, in Magdalen's absence, a false witness of treason which had never entered her mind—treason against her husband's life !

With his hand still mechanically pointing at the table, Noel Vanstone raised his head, and looked up at Mrs. Lecount.

“I took it from the cupboard,” she said, answering the look. “I took both bottles out together, not knowing which might be the bottle I wanted. I am as much shocked, as much frightened, as you are.”

“Poison !” he said to himself, slowly. “Poison locked up by my wife, in the cupboard in her own room.” He stopped, and looked at Mrs. Lecount once more. “For *me* ?” he asked, in a vacant, inquiring tone.

“We will not talk of it, sir, until your mind is more at ease,” said Mrs. Lecount. “In the mean time, the danger that lies waiting in this bottle, shall be instantly destroyed in your presence.” She took out the cork, and threw the laudanum out of window, and the empty bottle after it. “Let us try to forget this dreadful discovery for the present,” she resumed ; “let

us go down stairs at once. All that I have now to say to you, can be said in another room."

She helped him to rise from the chair, and took his arm in her own. "It is well for him; it is well for me," she thought, as they went down stairs together, "that I came when I did."

On crossing the passage, she stepped to the front door, where the carriage was waiting which had brought her from Dumfries, and instructed the coachman to put up his horses at the nearest inn, and to call again for her in two hours' time. This done, she accompanied Noel Vanstone into the sitting-room, stirred up the fire, and placed him before it comfortably in an easy-chair. He sat for a few minutes, warming his hands feebly like an old man, and staring straight into the flame. Then he spoke.

"When the woman came and threatened me in Vauxhall Walk," he began, still staring into the fire, "you came back to the parlour, after she was gone; and you told me——?" He stopped, shivered a little, and lost the thread of his recollections at that point.

"I told you, sir," said Mrs. Lecount, "that the woman was, in my opinion, Miss Vanstone herself. Don't start, Mr. Noel! Your wife is away, and I am here to take care of you. Say to yourself, if you feel frightened, 'Lecount is here; Lecount will take care of me.' The truth must be told, sir—however hard to bear the truth may be. Miss Magdalen Vanstone was the woman who came to you in disguise; and the woman who came to you in disguise, is the woman you

have married. The conspiracy which she threatened you with in London, is the conspiracy which has made her your wife. That is the plain truth. You have seen the dress up-stairs. If that dress had been no longer in existence, I should still have had my proofs to convince you. Thanks to my interview with Mrs. Bygrave, I have discovered the house your wife lodged at in London—it was opposite our house in Vauxhall Walk. I have laid my hand on one of the landlady's daughters, who watched your wife from an inner room, and saw her put on the disguise; who can speak to her identity, and to the identity of her companion, Mrs. Bygrave; and who has furnished me, at my own request, with a written statement of facts, which she is ready to affirm on oath, if any person ventures to contradict her. You shall read the statement, Mr. Noel, if you like, when you are fitter to understand it. You shall also read a letter in the handwriting of Miss Garth—who will repeat to you personally every word she has written to me—a letter formally denying that she was ever in Vauxhall Walk, and formally asserting that those moles on your wife's neck, are marks peculiar to Miss Magdalen Vanstone, whom she has known from childhood. I say it with a just pride—you will find no weak place anywhere in the evidence which I bring you. If Mr. Bygrave had not stolen my letter, you would have had your warning, before I was cruelly deceived into going to Zurich; and the proofs which I now bring you, after your marriage, I should then have offered to you before it. Don't hold me

responsible, sir, for what has happened since I left England. Blame your uncle's bastard daughter, and blame that villain with the brown eye and the green!"

She spoke her last venomous words as slowly and distinctly as she had spoken all the rest. Noel Vanstone made no answer—he still sat cowering over the fire. She looked round into his face. He was crying silently. "I was so fond of her!" said the miserable little creature; "and I thought she was so fond of Me!"

Mrs. Lecount turned her back on him in disdainful silence. "Fond of her!" As she repeated those words to herself, her haggard face became almost handsome again in the magnificent intensity of its contempt.

She walked to a book-case at the lower end of the room, and began examining the volumes in it. Before she had been long engaged in this way, she was startled by the sound of his voice, affrightedly calling her back. The tears were gone from his face: it was blank again with terror when he now turned it towards her.

"Lecount!" he said, holding to her with both hands. "Can an egg be poisoned? I had an egg for breakfast this morning—and a little toast."

"Make your mind easy, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "The poison of your wife's deceit is the only poison you have taken yet. If she had resolved already on making you pay the price of your folly with your life, she would not be absent from the house while you were left living in it. Dismiss the thought from your mind.

It is the middle of the day; you want refreshment. I have more to say to you, in the interests of your own safety—I have something for you to do, which must be done at once. Recruit your strength, and you will do it. I will set you the example of eating, if you still distrust the food in this house. Are you composed enough to give the servant her orders, if I ring the bell? It is necessary to the object I have in view for you, that nobody should think you ill in body, or troubled in mind. Try first with me before the servant comes in. Let us see how you look and speak when you say, ‘Bring up the lunch.’ ”

After two rehearsals, Mrs. Lecount considered him fit to give the order, without betraying himself.

The bell was answered by Louisa—Louisa looked hard at Mrs. Lecount. The luncheon was brought up by the housemaid—the housemaid looked hard at Mrs. Lecount. When luncheon was over, the table was cleared by the cook—the cook looked hard at Mrs. Lecount. The three servants were plainly suspicious that something extraordinary was going on in the house. It was hardly possible to doubt that they had arranged to share among themselves the three opportunities which the service of the table afforded them of entering the room.

The curiosity of which she was the object did not escape the penetration of Mrs. Lecount. “I did well,” she thought, “to arm myself in good time with the means of reaching my end. If I let the grass grow under my feet, one or other of those women might get in my

way." Roused by this consideration, she produced her travelling-bag from a corner, as soon as the last of the servants had left the room ; and seating herself at the end of the table opposite Noel Vanstone, looked at him for a moment, with a steady investigating attention. She had carefully regulated the quantity of wine which he had taken at luncheon—she had let him drink exactly enough to fortify, without confusing him—and she now examined his face critically, like an artist examining his picture, at the end of the day's work. The result appeared to satisfy her ; and she opened the serious business of the interview on the spot.

"Will you look at the written evidence I have mentioned to you, Mr. Noel, before I say any more?" she inquired. "Or are you sufficiently persuaded of the truth to proceed at once to the suggestion which I have now to make to you?"

"Let me hear your suggestion," he said, sullenly resting his elbows on the table, and leaning his head on his hands.

Mrs. Lecount took from her travelling-bag the written evidence to which she had just alluded, and carefully placed the papers on one side of him, within easy reach, if he wished to refer to them. Far from being daunted, she was visibly encouraged by the ungraciousness of his manner. Her experience of him informed her that the sign was a promising one. On those rare occasions when the little resolution that he possessed was roused in him, it invariably asserted itself—like the resolution of most other weak men—

aggressively. At such times, in proportion as he was outwardly sullen and discourteous to those about him, his resolution rose; and in proportion as he was considerate and polite, it fell. The tone of the answer he had just given, and the attitude he assumed at the table, convinced Mrs. Lecount that Spanish wine and Scotch mutton had done their duty, and had rallied his sinking courage.

"I will put the question to you for form's sake, sir, if you wish it," she proceeded. "But I am already certain, without any question at all, that you have made your will?"

He nodded his head without looking at her.

"You have made it in your wife's favour?"

He nodded again.

"You have left her everything you possess?"

"No."

Mrs. Lecount looked surprised.

"Did you exercise a reserve towards her, Mr. Noel, of your own accord?" she inquired, "or is it possible that your wife put her own limits to her interest in your will?"

He was uneasily silent—he was plainly ashamed to answer the question. Mrs. Lecount repeated it in a less direct form.

"How much have you left your widow, Mr. Noel, in the event of your death?"

"Eighty thousand pounds."

That reply answered the question. Eighty thousand pounds was exactly the fortune which Michael Vanstone

had taken from his brother's orphan children, at his brother's death—exactly the fortune of which Michael Vanstone's son had kept possession, in his turn, as pitilessly as his father before him. Noel Vanstone's silence was eloquent of the confession which he was ashamed to make. His doting weakness had, beyond all doubt, placed his whole property at the feet of his wife. And this girl, whose vindictive daring had defied all restraints—this girl, who had not shrunk from her desperate determination even at the church-door—had, in the very hour of her triumph, taken part only from the man who would willingly have given all!—had rigorously exacted her father's fortune from him to the last farthing; and had then turned her back on the hand that was tempting her with tens of thousands more! For the moment, Mrs. Lecount was fairly silenced by her own surprise; Magdalen had forced the astonishment from her which is akin to admiration, the astonishment which her enmity would fain have refused. She hated Magdalen with a tenfold hatred from that time.

“I have no doubt, sir,” she resumed, after a momentary silence, “that Mrs. Neel gave you excellent reasons why the provision for her at your death should be no more, and no less, than eighty thousand pounds. And, on the other hand, I am equally sure that you, in your innocence of all suspicion, found those reasons conclusive at the time. That time has now gone by. Your eyes are opened, sir—and you will not fail to remark (as I remark) that the Combe-Raven property happens

to reach the same sum exactly, as the legacy which your wife's own instructions directed you to leave her. If you are still in any doubt of the motive for which she married you, look in your own will—and there the motive is !”

He raised his head from his hands, and became closely attentive to what she was saying to him, for the first time since they had faced each other at the table. The Combe-Raven property had never been classed by itself in his estimation. It had come to him merged in his father's other possessions, at his father's death. The discovery which had now opened before him, was one to which his ordinary habits of thought, as well as his innocence of suspicion, had hitherto closed his eyes. He said nothing ; but he looked less sullenly at Mrs. Lecount. His manner was more ingratiating ; the high tide of his courage was already on the ebb.

“Your position, sir, must be as plain by this time to you as it is to me,” said Mrs. Lecount. “There is only one obstacle now left, between this woman and the attainment of her end. *That obstacle is your life.* After the discovery we have made up-stairs, I leave you to consider for yourself what your life is worth.”

At those terrible words, the ebbing resolution in him ran out to the last drop. “Don't frighten me !” he pleaded ; “I have been frightened enough already.” He rose, and dragged his chair after him round the table to Mrs. Lecount's side. He sat down and caressingly kissed her hand. “You good creature !” he said, in a sinking voice. “You excellent Lecount ! Tell

me what to do. I'm full of resolution—I'll do anything to save my life!"

"Have you got writing materials in the room, sir?" asked Mrs. Lecount. "Will you put them on the table, if you please?"

While the writing materials were in process of collection, Mrs. Lecount made a new demand on the resources of her travelling-bag. She took two papers from it, each endorsed in the same neat commercial handwriting. One was described as "Draft for proposed Will;" and the other, as "Draft for proposed Letter." When she placed them before her on the table, her hand shook a little; and she applied the smelling-salts, which she had brought with her in Noel Vanstone's interests, to her own nostrils.

"I had hoped, when I came here, Mr. Noel," she proceeded, "to have given you more time for consideration, than it seems safe to give you now. When you first told me of your wife's absence in London, I thought it probable that the object of her journey was to see her sister and Miss Garth. Since the horrible discovery we have made up-stairs, I am inclined to alter that opinion. Your wife's determination not to tell you who the friends are whom she has gone to see, fills me with alarm. She may have accomplices in London—accomplices, for anything we know to the contrary, in this house. All three of your servants, sir, have taken the opportunity in turn of coming into the room, and looking at me. I don't like their looks! Neither you nor I know what may happen from day to day—or even

from hour to hour. If you take my advice, you will get the start at once of all possible accidents; and when the carriage comes back, you will leave this house with me!"

"Yes, yes!" he said, eagerly; "I'll leave the house with you. I wouldn't stop here by myself for any sum of money that could be offered me. What do we want the pen and ink for? Are you to write, or am I?"

"You are to write, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "The means taken for promoting your own safety are to be means set in motion, from beginning to end, by yourself. I suggest, Mr. Noel—and you decide. Recognize your own position, sir. What is your first and foremost necessity? It is plainly this. You must destroy your wife's interest in your death, by making another will."

He vehemently nodded his approval; his colour rose and his blinking eyes brightened in malicious triumph. "She sha'n't have a farthing," he said to himself, in a whisper—"she sha'n't have a farthing!"

"When your will is made, sir," proceeded Mrs. Lecount, "you must place it in the hands of a trustworthy person—not my hands, Mr. Noel; I am only your servant! Then, when the will is safe, and when you are safe, write to your wife at this house. Tell her, her infamous imposture is discovered—tell her you have made a new will, which leaves her penniless at your death—tell her, in your righteous indignation, that she enters your doors no more. Place yourself in that

strong position, and it is no longer you who are at your wife's mercy, but your wife who is at yours. Assert your own power, sir, with the law to help you—and crush this woman into submission to any terms for the future that you please to impose.”

He eagerly took up the pen. “Yes,” he said, with a vindictive self-importance, “any terms I please to impose.” He suddenly checked himself, and his face became dejected and perplexed. “How can I do it now?” he asked, throwing down the pen as quickly as he had taken it up.

“Do what, sir?” inquired Mrs. Lecount.

“How can I make my will, with Mr. Loscombe away in London, and no lawyer here to help me?”

Mrs. Lecount gently tapped the papers before her on the table with her forefinger.

“All the help you need, sir, is waiting for you here,” she said. “I considered this matter carefully, before I came to you; and I provided myself with the confidential assistance of a friend, to guide me through those difficulties which I could not penetrate for myself. The friend to whom I refer, is a gentleman of Swiss extraction, but born and bred in England. He is not a lawyer by profession—but he has had his own sufficient experience of the law, nevertheless; and he has supplied me, not only with a model by which you may make your will, but with the written sketch of a letter which it is as important for us to have, as the model of the will itself. There is another necessity waiting for you, Mr. Noel, which I have not mentioned yet—but

which is no less urgent in its way, than the necessity of the will."

"What is it?" he asked, with roused curiosity.

"We will take it in its turn, sir," answered Mrs. Lecount. "Its turn has not come yet. The will, if you please, first. I will dictate from the model in my possession—and you will write."

Noel Vanstone looked at the draft for the Will and the draft for the Letter, with suspicious curiosity.

"I think I ought to see the papers myself, before you dictate," he said. "It would be more satisfactory to my own mind, Lecount."

"By all means, sir," rejoined Mrs. Lecount, handing him the papers immediately.

He read the draft for the Will first, pausing and knitting his brows distrustfully, wherever he found blank spaces left in the manuscript, to be filled in with the names of persons, and the enumeration of sums bequeathed to them. Two or three minutes of reading brought him to the end of the paper. He gave it back to Mrs. Lecount without making any objection to it.

The draft for the Letter was a much longer document. He obstinately read it through to the end, with an expression of perplexity and discontent which showed that it was utterly unintelligible to him. "I must have this explained," he said, with a touch of his old self-importance, "before I take any steps in the matter."

"It shall be explained, sir, as we go on," said Mrs. Lecount.

“Every word of it?”

“Every word of it, Mr. Noel, when its turn comes. You have no objection to the will? To the will, then, as I said before, let us devote ourselves first. You have seen for yourself that it is short enough and simple enough for a child to understand it. But if any doubts remain on your mind, by all means compose those doubts by showing your will to a lawyer by profession. In the mean time, let me not be considered intrusive, if I remind you that we are all mortal, and that the lost opportunity can never be recalled. While your time is your own, sir, and while your enemies are unsuspecting of you, make your will!”

She opened a sheet of note-paper, and smoothed it out before him; she dipped the pen in ink, and placed it in his hands. He took it from her without speaking—he was, to all appearance, suffering under some temporary uneasiness of mind. But the main point was gained. There he sat, with the paper before him, and the pen in his hand; ready at last, in right earnest, to make his will.

“The first question for you to decide, sir,” said Mrs. Lecount, after a preliminary glance at her Draft, “is your choice of an executor. I have no desire to influence your decision; but I may, without impropriety, remind you that a wise choice means, in other words, the choice of an old and tried friend whom you know that you can trust.”

“It means the admiral, I suppose?” said Noel Vanstone.

Mrs. Lecount bowed.

"Very well," he continued. "The admiral let it be."

There was plainly some oppression still weighing on his mind. Even under the trying circumstances in which he was placed, it was not in his nature to take Mrs. Lecount's perfectly sensible and disinterested advice without a word of cavil, as he had taken it now.

"Are you ready, sir?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Lecount dictated the first paragraph, from the Draft, as follows:—

"This is the last Will and Testament of me, Noel Vanstone, now living at Baliol Cottage, near Dumfries. I revoke, absolutely and in every particular, my former will executed on the thirtieth of September, eighteen hundred and forty-seven; and I hereby appoint Rear-Admiral Arthur Everard Bartram, of St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, Essex, sole executor of this my will."

"Have you written those words, sir?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Lecount laid down the Draft; Noel Vanstone laid down the pen. They neither of them looked at each other. There was a long silence.

"I am waiting, Mr. Noel," said Mrs. Lecount, at last, "to hear what your wishes are, in respect to the disposal of your fortune. Your *large* fortune," she added, with merciless emphasis.

He took up the pen again, and began picking the feathers from the quill in dead silence.

“Perhaps, your existing will may help you to instruct me, sir,” pursued Mrs. Lecount. “May I inquire to whom you left all your surplus money, after leaving the eighty thousand pounds to your wife?”

If he had answered that question plainly, he must have said, “I have left the whole surplus to my cousin, George Bartram”—and the implied acknowledgment that Mrs. Lecount’s name was not mentioned in the will, must then have followed in Mrs. Lecount’s presence. A much bolder man, in his situation, might have felt the same oppression and the same embarrassment which he was feeling now. He picked the last morsel of feather from the quill; and, desperately leaping the pitfall under his feet, advanced to meet Mrs. Lecount’s claims on him of his own accord.

“I would rather not talk of any will, but the will I am making now,” he said uneasily. “The first thing, Lecount——” He hesitated—put the bare end of the quill into his mouth—gnawed at it thoughtfully—and said no more.

“Yes, sir?” persisted Mrs. Lecount.

“The first thing is——”

“Yes, sir?”

“The first thing is, to—to make some provision for You?”

He spoke the last words in a tone of plaintive interrogation—as if all hope of being met by a magnanimous refusal had not deserted him, even yet. Mrs.

Lecount enlightened his mind on this point, without a moment's loss of time.

"Thank you, Mr. Noel," she said, with the tone and manner of a woman who was not acknowledging a favour, but receiving a right.

He took another bite at the quill. The perspiration began to appear on his face.

"The difficulty is," he remarked, "to say how much."

"Your lamented father, sir," rejoined Mrs. Lecount, "met that difficulty (if you remember) at the time of his last illness?"

"I don't remember," said Noel Vanstone, doggedly.

"You were on one side of his bed, sir; and I was on the other. We were vainly trying to persuade him to make his will. After telling us he would wait, and make his will when he was well again—he looked round at me, and said some kind and feeling words which my memory will treasure to my dying day. Have you forgotten those words, Mr. Noel?"

"Yes," said Mr. Noel, without hesitation.

"In my present situation, sir," retorted Mrs. Lecount, "delicacy forbids me to improve your memory."

She looked at her watch, and relapsed into silence. He clenched his hands, and writhed from side to side of his chair, in an agony of indecision. Mrs. Lecount passively refused to take the slightest notice of him.

"What should you say—?" he began, and suddenly stopped again.

“Yes, sir?”

“What should you say to—a thousand pounds?”

Mrs. Lecount rose from her chair, and looked him full in the face, with the majestic indignation of an outraged woman.

“After the service I have rendered you to-day, Mr. Noel,” she said, “I have at least earned a claim on your respect—if I have earned nothing more. I wish you good morning.”

“Two thousand!” cried Noel Vanstone, with the courage of despair.

Mrs. Lecount folded up her papers, and hung her travelling-bag over her arm in contemptuous silence.

“Three thousand!”

Mrs. Lecount moved with impenetrable dignity from the table to the door.

“Four thousand!”

Mrs. Lecount gathered her shawl round her with a shudder, and opened the door.

“Five thousand!”

He clasped his hands, and wrung them at her in a frenzy of rage and suspense. “Five thousand,” was the death-cry of his pecuniary suicide.

Mrs. Lecount softly shut the door again, and came back a step.

“Free of legacy duty, sir?” she inquired.

“No!”

Mrs. Lecount turned on her heel, and opened the door again.

“Yes!”

Mrs. Lecount came back, and resumed her place at the table, as if nothing had happened.

“Five thousand pounds, free of legacy duty, was the sum, sir, which your father’s grateful regard promised me in his will,” she said, quietly. “If you choose to exert your memory, as you have not chosen to exert it yet, your memory will tell you that I speak the truth. I accept your filial performance of your father’s promise, Mr. Noel—and there I stop. I scorn to take a mean advantage of my position towards you; I scorn to grasp anything from your fears. You are protected by my respect for myself, and for the Illustrious Name I bear. You are welcome to all that I have done, and to all that I have suffered in your service. The widow of Professor Lecompte, sir, takes what is justly hers—and takes no more !”

As she spoke those words, the traces of sickness seemed, for the moment, to disappear from her face; her eyes shone with a steady inner light; all the woman warmed and brightened in the radiance of her own triumph—the triumph, trebly won, of carrying her point, of vindicating her integrity, and of matching Magdalen’s incorruptible self-denial on Magdalen’s own ground.

“When you are yourself again, sir, we will proceed. Let us wait a little first.”

She gave him time to compose himself; and then, after first looking at her Draft, dictated the second paragraph of the will, in these terms:

"I give and bequeath to Madame Virginie Lecompte (widow of Professor Lecompte, late of Zurich) the sum of Five Thousand Pounds, free of Legacy Duty. And, in making this bequest, I wish to place it on record that I am not only expressing my own sense of Madame Lecompte's attachment and fidelity in the capacity of my housekeeper, but that I also believe myself to be executing the intentions of my deceased father, who, but for the circumstance of his dying intestate, would have left Madame Lecompte, in *his* will, the same token of grateful regard for her services, which I now leave her in mine."

"Have you written the last words, sir?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Lecount leaned across the table, and offered Noel Vanstone her hand.

"Thank you, Mr. Noel," she said. "The five thousand pounds is the acknowledgment on your father's side of what I have done for him. The words in the will are the acknowledgment on yours."

A faint smile flickered over his face for the first time. It comforted him, on reflection, to think that matters might have been worse. There was balm for his wounded spirit, in paying the debt of gratitude by a sentence not negotiable at his banker's. Whatever his father might have done—he had got Lecount a bargain, after all!

"A little more writing, sir," resumed Mrs. Lecount, "and your painful, but necessary, duty will be per-

formed. The trifling matter of my legacy being settled, we may come to the important question that is left. The future direction of a large fortune is now waiting your word of command. To whom is it to go?"

He began to writhe again in his chair. Even under the all-powerful fascination of his wife, the parting with his money on paper had not been accomplished without a pang. He had endured the pang; he had resigned himself to the sacrifice. And now, here was the dreaded ordeal again, awaiting him mercilessly for the second time!

"Perhaps it may assist your decision, sir, if I repeat a question which I have put to you already," observed Mrs. Lecount. "In the will that you made under your wife's influence, to whom did you leave the surplus money which remained at your own disposal?"

There was no harm in answering the question, now. He acknowledged that he had left the money to his cousin George.

"You could have done nothing better, Mr. Noel—and you can do nothing better now," said Mrs. Lecount. "Mr. George and his two sisters are your only relations left. One of those sisters is an incurable invalid, with more than money enough already for all the wants which her affliction allows her to feel. The other is the wife of a man, even richer than yourself. To leave the money to these sisters is to waste it. To leave the money to their brother George, is to give your cousin exactly the assistance which he will want, when he one day inherits his uncle's dilapidated house, and his uncle's im-

poverished estate. A will which names the admiral your executor, and Mr. George your heir, is the right will for you to make. It does honour to the claims of friendship, and it does justice to the claims of blood."

She spoke warmly—for she spoke with a grateful remembrance of all that she herself owed to the hospitality of St. Crux. Noel Vanstone took up another pen, and began to strip the second quill of its feathers, as he had stripped the first.

"Yes," he said, reluctantly; "I suppose George must have it—I suppose George has the principal claim on me." He hesitated: he looked at the door, he looked at the window, as if he longed to make his escape by one way or the other. "Oh, Lecount," he cried, piteously, "it's such a large fortune! Let me wait a little, before I leave it to anybody!"

To his surprise, Mrs. Lecount at once complied with this characteristic request.

"I wish you to wait, sir," she replied. "I have something important to say, before you add another line to your will. A little while since, I told you there was a second necessity connected with your present situation, which had not been provided for yet—but which must be provided for, when the time came. The time has come now. You have a serious difficulty to meet and conquer, before you can leave your fortune to your cousin George."

"What difficulty?" he asked.

Mrs. Lecount rose from her chair, without answering

—stole to the door—and suddenly threw it open. No one was listening outside; the passage was a solitude, from one end to the other.

“I distrust all servants,” she said, returning to her place—“your servants particularly. Sit closer, Mr. Noel. What I have now to say to you, must be heard by no living creature but ourselves.”

CHAPTER III.

THERE was a pause of a few minutes, while Mrs. Lecount opened the second of the two papers which lay before her on the table, and refreshed her memory by looking it rapidly through. This done, she once more addressed herself to Noel Vanstone ; carefully lowering her voice, so as to render it inaudible to any one who might be listening in the passage outside.

“I must beg your permission, sir,” she began, “to return to the subject of your wife. I do so most unwillingly ; and I promise you that what I have now to say about her, shall be said, for your sake and for mine, in the fewest words. What do we know of this woman, Mr. Noel—judging her by her own confession when she came to us in the character of Miss Garth, and by her own acts afterwards at Aldborough ? We know that, if death had not snatched your father out of her reach, she was ready with her plot to rob him of the Combe-Raven money. We know that when you inherited the money in your turn, she was ready with her plot to rob *you*. We know how she carried that plot through to the end ; and we know that nothing but your death is wanted, at this moment, to crown her rapacity and

her deception with success. We are sure of these things. We are sure that she is young, bold, and clever—that she has neither doubts, scruples, nor pity—and that she possesses the personal qualities which men in general (quite incomprehensibly to *me*!) are weak enough to admire. These are not fancies, Mr. Noel, but facts—you know them as well as I do.”

He made a sign in the affirmative, and Mrs. Lecount went on :

“Keep in your mind what I have said of the past, sir, and now look with me to the future. I hope and trust you have a long life still before you ; but let us, for the moment only, suppose the case of your death—your death leaving this will behind you, which gives your fortune to your cousin George. I am told there is an office in London, in which copies of all wills must be kept. Any curious stranger who chooses to pay a shilling for the privilege, may enter that office, and may read any will in the place, at his or her discretion. Do you see what I am coming to, Mr. Noel ? Your disinherited widow pays her shilling, and reads your will. Your disinherited widow sees that the Combe-Raven money, which has gone from your father to you, goes next from you to Mr. George Bartram. What is the certain end of that discovery ? The end is that you leave to your cousin and your friend, the legacy of this woman’s vengeance and this woman’s deceit—vengeance made more resolute, deceit made more devilish than ever, by her exasperation at her own failure. What is your cousin George ? He is a generous, unsuspecting man ;

incapable of deceit himself, and fearing no deception in others. Leave him at the mercy of your wife's unscrupulous fascinations and your wife's unfathomable deceit—and I see the end, as certainly as I see you sitting there ! She will blind his eyes, as she blinded yours ; and, in spite of *you*, in spite of *me*, she will have the money !”

She stopped ; and left her last words time to gain their hold on his mind. The circumstances had been stated so clearly, the conclusion from them had been so plainly drawn, that he seized her meaning without an effort, and seized it at once.

“I see !” he said, vindictively clenching his hands. “I understand, Lecount ! She sha’n’t have a farthing. What shall I do ? Shall I leave the money to the admiral ?” He paused, and considered a little. “No,” he resumed ; “there’s the same danger in leaving it to the admiral that there is in leaving it to George.”

“There is no danger, Mr. Noel, if you take my advice.”

“What is your advice ?”

“Follow your own idea, sir. Take the pen in hand again, and leave the money to Admiral Bartram.”

He mechanically dipped the pen in the ink—and then hesitated.

“You shall know where I am leading you, sir,” said Mrs. Lecount, “before you sign your will. In the mean time, let us gain every inch of ground we can, as we go on. I want the will to be all written out, before we advance a single step beyond it. Begin your third

paragraph, Mr. Noel, under the lines which leave me my legacy of five thousand pounds."

She dictated the last momentous sentence of the will (from the rough draft in her own possession) in these words :

"The whole residue of my estate, after payment of my burial expenses and my lawful debts, I give and bequeath to Rear-Admiral Arthur Everard Bartram, my Executor aforesaid ; to be by him applied to such uses as he may think fit.

"Signed, sealed, and delivered this third day of November, eighteen hundred and forty-seven, by Noel Vanstone, the within-named testator, as and for his last Will and Testament, in the presence of us——."

"Is that all?" asked Noel Vanstone, in astonishment.

"That is enough, sir, to bequeath your fortune to the admiral ; and, therefore, that is all. Now let us go back to the case which we have supposed already. Your widow pays her shilling, and sees this will. There is the Combe-Raven money left to Admiral Bartram ; with a declaration in plain words that it is his, to use as he likes. When she sees this, what does she do ? She sets her trap for the admiral. He is a bachelor, and he is an old man. Who is to protect him against the arts of this desperate woman ? Protect him yourself, sir, with a few more strokes of that pen which has done such wonders already. You have left him this legacy, in your will—which your wife sees. Take the legacy away again, in a letter—which is a dead secret

between the admiral and you. Put the will and the letter under one cover, and place them in the admiral's possession, with your written directions to him to break the seal on the day of your death. Let the will say what it says now ; and let the letter (which is your secret and his) tell him the truth. Say that in leaving him your fortune, you leave it with the request that he will take his legacy with one hand from you, and give it with the other to his nephew George. Tell him that your trust in this matter rests solely on your confidence in his honour, and on your belief in his affectionate remembrance of your father and yourself. You have known the admiral since you were a boy. He has his little whims and oddities—but he is a gentleman from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot ; and he is utterly incapable of proving false to a trust in his honour, reposed by his dead friend. Meet the difficulty boldly, by such a stratagem as this ; and you save these two helpless men from your wife's snares, one by means of the other. Here, on one side, is your will, which gives the fortune to the admiral, and sets her plotting accordingly. And there, on the other side, is your letter, which privately puts the money into the nephew's hands !”

The malicious dexterity of this combination was exactly the dexterity which Noel Vanstone was most fit to appreciate. He tried to express his approval and admiration in words. Mrs. Lecount held up her hand warningly, and closed his lips.

“Wait, sir, before you express your opinion,” she

went on. "Half the difficulty is all that we have conquered yet. Let us say, the admiral has made the use of your legacy which you have privately requested him to make of it. Sooner or later, however well the secret may be kept, your wife will discover the truth. What follows that discovery? She lays siege to Mr. George. All you have done is to leave him the money by a roundabout way. There he is, after an interval of time, as much at her mercy as if you had openly mentioned him in your will. What is the remedy for this? The remedy is to mislead her, if we can, for the second time—to set up an obstacle between her and the money, for the protection of your cousin George. Can you guess for yourself, Mr. Noel, what is the most promising obstacle we can put in her way?"

He shook his head. Mrs. Lecount smiled, and startled him into close attention by laying her hand on his arm.

"Put a Woman in her way, sir!" she whispered in her wildest tones. "*We* don't believe in that fascinating beauty of hers—whatever *you* may do. *Our* lips don't burn to kiss those smooth cheeks. *Our* arms don't long to be round that supple waist. *We* see through her smiles and her graces, and her stays and her padding—she can't fascinate *us*! Put a woman in her way, Mr. Noel! Not a woman in my helpless situation, who is only a servant—but a woman with the authority and the jealousy of a Wife. Make it a condition, in your letter to the admiral, that if Mr. George is a bachelor at the time of your death, he shall marry

within a certain time afterwards—or he shall not have the legacy. Suppose he remains single in spite of your condition—who is to have the money then? Put a woman in your wife's way, sir, once more—and leave the fortune, in that case, to the married sister of your cousin George."

She paused. Noel Vanstone again attempted to express his opinion; and again Mrs. Lecount's hand extinguished him in silence.

"If you approve, Mr. Noel," she said, "I will take your approval for granted. If you object, I will meet your objection before it is out of your mouth. You may say:—Suppose this condition is sufficient to answer the purpose, why hide it in a private letter to the admiral? Why not openly write it down, with my cousin's name, in the will? Only for one reason, sir. Only because the secret way is the sure way, with such a woman as your wife. The more secret you can keep your intentions, the more time you force her to waste in finding them out for herself. That time which she loses, is time gained from her treachery by the admiral—time gained by Mr. George (if he is still a bachelor) for his undisturbed choice of a lady—time gained, for her own security, by the object of his choice, who might otherwise be the first object of your wife's suspicion and your wife's hostility. Remember the bottle we have discovered upstairs; and keep this desperate woman ignorant, and therefore harmless, as long as you can. There is my advice, Mr. Noel, in the fewest and plainest words. What do you say, sir? Am I almost as

clever in my way as your friend Mr. Bygrave? Can I, too, conspire a little, when the object of my conspiracy is to assist your wishes and to protect your friends?"

Permitted the use of his tongue at last, Noel Vanstone's admiration of Mrs. Lecount expressed itself in terms precisely similar to those which he had used on a former occasion, in paying his compliments to Captain Wragge. "What a head you have got!" were the grateful words he had once spoken to Mrs. Lecount's bitterest enemy. "What a head you have got!" were the grateful words which he now spoke again to Mrs. Lecount herself. So do extremes meet; and such is sometimes the all-embracing capacity of the approval of a fool!

"Allow my head, sir, to deserve the compliment which you have paid to it," said Mrs. Lecount. "The letter to the admiral is not written yet. Your will there, is a body without a soul—an Adam without an Eve—until the letter is completed, and laid by its side. A little more dictation on my part, a little more writing on yours—and our work is done. Pardon me. The letter will be longer than the will—we must have arger paper than the note-paper this time."

The writing-case was searched, and some letter-paper was found in it of the size required. Mrs. Lecount resumed her dictation; and Noel Vanstone resumed his pen.

“Baliol Cottage, Dumfries,

“November 3rd, 1847.

“Private.

“DEAR ADMIRAL BARTRAM,

“When you open my Will (in which you are named my sole executor), you will find that I have bequeathed the whole residue of my estate—after payment of one legacy of five thousand pounds—to yourself. It is the purpose of my letter to tell you privately what the object is for which I have left you the fortune which is now placed in your hands.

“I beg you to consider this large legacy, as intended, under certain conditions, to be given by you to your nephew George. If your nephew is married at the time of my death, and if his wife is living, I request you to put him at once in possession of your legacy; accompanying it by the expression of my desire (which I am sure he will consider a sacred and binding obligation on him) that he will settle the money on his wife—and on his children, if he has any. If, on the other hand, he is unmarried at the time of my death, or if he is a widower—in either of those cases, I make it a condition of his receiving the legacy, that he shall be married within the period of——”

Mrs. Lecount laid down the Draft letter from which she had been dictating thus far, and informed Noel Vanstone by a sign that his pen might rest.

“We have come to the question of time, sir,” she observed. “How long will you give your cousin to

marry, if he is single, or a widower, at the time of your death?"

"Shall I give him a year?" inquired Noel Vanstone.

"If we had nothing to consider but the interests of Propriety," said Mrs. Lecount, "I should say a year too, sir—especially if Mr. George should happen to be a widower. But we have your wife to consider, as well as the interests of Propriety. A year of delay, between your death and your cousin's marriage, is a dangerously long time to leave the disposal of your fortune in suspense. Give a determined woman a year to plot and contrive in, and there is no saying what she may not do."

"Six months?" suggested Noel Vanstone.

"Six months, sir," rejoined Mrs. Lecount, "is the preferable time of the two. A six months' interval from the day of your death is enough for Mr. George.—You look discomposed, sir. What is the matter?"

"I wish you wouldn't talk so much about my death," he broke out petulantly. "I don't like it! I hate the very sound of the word!"

Mrs. Lecount smiled resignedly, and referred to her Draft.

"I see the word 'decease' written here," she remarked. "Perhaps, Mr. Noel, you would prefer it?"

"Yes," he said; "I prefer 'Decease.' It doesn't sound so dreadful as 'Death.'"

"Let us go on with the letter, sir."

She resumed her dictation as follows :

“ in either of those cases, I make it a condition of his receiving the legacy that he shall be married within the period of Six calendar months from the day of my decease ; that the woman he marries shall *not* be a widow ; and that his marriage shall be a marriage by Banns, publicly celebrated in the parish church of Ossory—where he has been known from his childhood, and where the family and circumstances of his future wife are likely to be the subject of public interest and inquiry.” .

“ This,” said Mrs. Lecount, quietly looking up from the Draft, “ is to protect Mr. George, sir, in case the same trap is set for him, which was successfully set for you. She will not find her false character and her false name fit quite so easily, next time—no, not even with Mr. Bygrave to help her ! Another dip of ink, Mr. Noel ; let us write the next paragraph. Are you ready ?”

“ Yes.”

Mrs. Lecount went on :

“ If your nephew fails to comply with these conditions—that is to say, if, being either a bachelor or a widower at the time of my decease, he fails to marry in all respects as I have here instructed him to marry, within Six calendar months from that time—it is my desire that he shall not receive the legacy, or any part of it. I request you, in the case here supposed, to pass him over altogether ; and to give the fortune

left you in my will, to his married sister, Mrs. Girdlestone.

“Having now put you in possession of my motives and intentions, I come to the next question which it is necessary to consider. If, when you open this letter, your nephew is an unmarried man, it is clearly indispensable that he should know of the conditions here imposed on him, as soon, if possible, as you know of them yourself. Are you, under these circumstances, freely to communicate to him what I have here written to you? Or, are you to leave him under the impression that no such private expression of my wishes as this is in existence; and are you to state all the conditions relating to his marriage, as if they emanated entirely from yourself?

“If you will adopt this latter alternative, you will add one more to the many obligations under which your friendship has placed me.

“I have serious reason to believe that the possession of my money, and the discovery of any peculiar arrangements relating to the disposal of it, will be objects (after my decease) of the fraud and conspiracy of an unscrupulous person. I am therefore anxious—for your sake, in the first place—that no suspicion of the existence of this letter should be conveyed to the mind of the person to whom I allude. And I am equally desirous—for Mrs. Girdlestone’s sake, in the second place—that this same person should be entirely ignorant that the legacy will pass into Mrs. Girdlestone’s possession, if your nephew is not married in the

given time. I know George's easy, pliable disposition ; I dread the attempts that will be made to practise on it ; and I feel sure that the prudent course will be, to abstain from trusting him with secrets, the rash revelation of which might be followed by serious, and even dangerous results.

“State the conditions, therefore, to your nephew, as if they were your own. Let him think they have been suggested to your mind by the new responsibilities imposed on you as a man of property, by your position in my will, and by your consequent anxiety to provide for the perpetuation of the family name. If these reasons are not sufficient to satisfy him, there can be no objection to your referring him, for any further explanations which he may desire, to his wedding-day.

“I have done. My last wishes are now confided to you, in implicit reliance on your honour, and on your tender regard for the memory of your friend. Of the miserable circumstances which compel me to write as I have written here, I say nothing. You will hear of them, if my life is spared, from my own lips—for you will be the first friend whom I shall consult in my difficulty and distress. Keep this letter strictly secret, and strictly in your own possession, until my requests are complied with. Let no human being but yourself know where it is, on any pretence whatever.

“Believe me, dear Admiral Bartram,

“Affectionately yours,

“NOEL VANSTONE.”

"Have you signed, sir?" asked Mrs. Lecount. "Let me look the letter over, if you please, before we seal it up."

She read the letter carefully. In Noel Vanstone's close, cramped handwriting, it filled two pages of letter paper, and ended at the top of the third page. Instead of using an envelope, Mrs. Lecount folded it, neatly and securely, in the old-fashioned way. She lit the taper in the inkstand, and returned the letter to the writer.

"Seal it, Mr. Noel," she said, "with your own hand, and your own seal." She extinguished the taper, and handed him the pen again. "Address the letter, sir," she proceeded, "to *Admiral Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, Essex*. Now add these words, and sign them, above the address: *To be kept in your own possession, and to be opened by yourself only, on the day of my death—or 'Decease,' if you prefer it—Noel Vanstone*. Have you done? Let me look at it again. Quite right in every particular. Accept my congratulations, sir. If your wife has not plotted her last plot for the Combe-Raven money, it is not your fault, Mr. Noel—and not mine!"

Finding his attention released by the completion of the letter, Noel Vanstone reverted at once to purely personal considerations. "There is my packing-up to be thought of now," he said. "I can't go away without my warm things."

"Excuse me, sir," rejoined Mrs. Lecount, "there is the Will to be signed first; and there must be two

persons found to witness your signature." She looked out of the front window, and saw the carriage waiting at the door. "The coachman will do for one of the witnesses," she said. "He is in respectable service at Dumfries, and he can be found if he happens to be wanted. We must have one of your own servants, I suppose, for the other witness. They are all detestable women; but the cook is the least ill-looking of the three. Send for the cook, sir, while I go out and call the coachman. When we have got our witnesses here, you have only to speak to them in these words:— 'I have a document here to sign, and I wish you to write your names on it, as witnesses of my signature.' Nothing more, Mr. Noel! Say those few words, in your usual manner—and, when the signing is over, I will see myself to your packing-up, and your warm things."

She went to the front door, and summoned the coachman to the parlour. On her return, she found the cook already in the room. The cook looked mysteriously offended, and stared without intermission at Mrs. Lecount. In a minute more, the coachman—an elderly man—came in. He was preceded by a relishing odour of whisky—but his head was Scotch; and nothing but his odour betrayed him.

"I have a document here to sign," said Noel Vanstone, repeating his lesson; "and I wish you to write your names on it, as witnesses of my signature."

The coachman looked at the will. The cook never removed her eyes from Mrs. Lecount.

"Ye'll no object, sir," said the coachman, with the national caution showing itself in every wrinkle on his face—"ye'll no object, sir, to tell me, first, what the Doecument may be?"

Mrs. Lecount interposed before Noel Vanstone's indignation could express itself in words.

"You must tell the man, sir, that this is your Will," she said. "When he witnesses your signature, he can see as much for himself if he looks at the top of the page."

"Ay, ay," said the coachman, looking at the top of the page immediately. "His last Wull and Testament. Hech, sirs! there's a sair confronting of Death, in a Doecument like yon! A' flesh is grass," continued the coachman, exhaling an additional puff of whisky, and looking up devoutly at the ceiling. "Tak' those words in connection with that other Screecture:—Many are ca'ad but few are chosen. Tak' that again, in connection with Rev'lations, Chapter the First; verses, One to Fefteen. Lay the whole to heart—and what's your Walth, then? Dross, sirs! And your body? (Screecture again.) Clay for the potter! And your life? (Screecture once more.) The Breeth o' your Nostrils!"

The cook listened as if the cook was at church—but she never removed her eyes from Mrs. Lecount.

"You had better sign, sir. This is apparently some custom prevalent in Dumfries during the transaction of business," said Mrs. Lecount resignedly. "The man means well, I dare say."

She added those last words in a soothing tone, for she saw that Noel Vanstone's indignation was fast merging into alarm. The coachman's outburst of exhortation seemed to have inspired him with fear, as well as disgust.

He dipped the pen in the ink, and signed the Will without uttering a word. The coachman (descending instantly from Theology to Business) watched the signature with the most scrupulous attention; and signed his own name as witness, with an implied commentary on the proceeding, in the form of another puff of whisky, exhaled through the medium of a heavy sigh. The cook looked away from Mrs. Lecount with an effort—signed her name in a violent hurry—and looked back again with a start, as if she expected to see a loaded pistol (produced in the interval) in the house-keeper's hands. "Thank you," said Mrs. Lecount, in her friendliest manner. The cook shut up her lips aggressively and looked at her master. "You may go!" said her master. The cook coughed contemptuously—and went.

"We sha'n't keep you long," said Mrs. Lecount, dismissing the coachman. "In half an hour, or less, we shall be ready for the journey back."

The coachman's austere countenance relaxed for the first time. He smiled mysteriously, and approached Mrs. Lecount on tiptoe.

"Ye'll no forget one thing, my leddy," he said, with the most ingratiating politeness. "Ye'll no forget the witnessing as weel as the driving, when ye pay me for

my day's work!" He laughed with guttural gravity; and, leaving his atmosphere behind him, stalked out of the room.

"Lecount," said Noel Vanstone, as soon as the coachman closed the door. "Did I hear you tell that man we should be ready in half an hour?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you blind?"

He asked the question with an angry stamp of his foot. Mrs. Lecount looked at him in astonishment.

"Can't you see the brute is drunk?" he went on, more and more irritably. "Is my life nothing? Am I to be left at the mercy of a drunken coachman? I won't trust that man to drive me, for any consideration under heaven! I'm surprised you could think of it, Lecount."

"The man has been drinking, sir," said Mrs. Lecount. "It is easy to see, and to smell, that. But he is evidently used to drinking. If he is sober enough to walk quite straight—which he certainly does—and to sign his name in an excellent handwriting—which you may see for yourself on the Will—I venture to think he is sober enough to drive us to Dumfries."

"Nothing of the sort! You're a foreigner, Lecount; you don't understand these people. They drink whisky from morning to night. Whisky is the strongest spirit that's made; whisky is notorious for its effect on the brain. I tell you, I won't run the risk. I never was driven, and I never will be driven, by anybody but a sober man."

“Must I go back to Dumfries by myself, sir?”

“And leave me here? Leave me alone in this house after what has happened? How do I know my wife may not come back to-night? How do I know her journey is not a blind to mislead me? Have you no feeling, Lecount? Can you leave me in my miserable situation——?” He sank into a chair and burst out crying over his own idea, before he had completed the expression of it in words. “Too bad!” he said, with his handkerchief over his face—“too bad!”

It was impossible not to pity him. If ever mortal was pitiable, he was the man. He had broken down at last, under the conflict of violent emotions which had been roused in him, since the morning. The effort to follow Mrs. Lecount along the mazes of intricate combination through which she had steadily led the way, had upheld him while that effort lasted: the moment it was at an end, he dropped. The coachman had hastened a result—of which the coachman was far from being the cause.

“You surprise me, you distress me, sir,” said Mrs. Lecount. “I entreat you to compose yourself. I will stay here, if you wish it, with pleasure—I will stay here to-night, for your sake. You want rest and quiet, after this dreadful day. The coachman shall be instantly sent away, Mr. Noel. I will give him a note to the landlord of the hotel,—and the carriage shall come back for us to-morrow morning, with another man to drive it.”

The prospect which those words presented, cheered him. He wiped his eyes, and kissed Mrs. Lecount's hand.

"Yes!" he said faintly; "send the coachman away—and you stop here. You good creature! You excellent Lecount! Send the drunken brute away, and come back directly. We will be comfortable by the fire, Lecount—and have a nice little dinner—and try to make it like old times." His weak voice faltered; he returned to the fireside, and melted into tears again under the pathetic influence of his own idea.

Mrs. Lecount left him for a minute to dismiss the coachman. When she returned to the parlour, she found him with his hand on the bell.

"What do you want, sir?" she asked.

"I want to tell the servants to get your room ready," he answered. "I wish to show you every attention, Lecount."

"You are all kindness, Mr. Noel—but wait one moment. It may be well to have these papers put out of the way, before the servant comes in again. If you will place the Will and the Sealed Letter together in one envelope—and if you will direct it to the admiral—I will take care that the enclosure so addressed is safely placed in his own hands. Will you come to the table, Mr. Noel, only for one minute more?"

No! He was obstinate; he refused to move from the fire; he was sick and tired of writing; he wished he had never been born, and he loathed the sight of pen and ink. All Mrs. Lecount's patience, and all

Mrs. Lecount's persuasion, were required to induce him to write the admiral's address for the second time. She only succeeded by bringing the blank envelope to him upon the paper-case, and putting it coaxingly on his lap. He grumbled, he even swore, but he directed the envelope at last, in these terms: "To Adniral Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. Favoured by Mrs. Lecount." With that final act of compliance, his docility came to an end. He refused, in the fiercest terms, to seal the envelope.

There was no need to press this proceeding on him. His seal lay ready on the table; and it mattered nothing whether he used it, or whether a person in his confidence used it for him. Mrs. Lecount sealed the envelope, with its two important enclosures placed safely inside.

She opened her travelling-bag for the last time, and pausing for a moment before she put the sealed packet away, looked at it with a triumph too deep for words. She smiled as she dropped it into the bag. Not the shadow of a suspicion that the Will might contain superfluous phrases and expressions which no practical lawyer would have used; not the vestige of a doubt whether the Letter was quite as complete a document as a practical lawyer might have made it, troubled her mind. In blind reliance—born of her hatred for Magdalen and her hunger for revenge—in blind reliance on her own abilities, and on her friend's law, she trusted the future implicitly to the promise of the morning's work.

As she locked her travelling-bag, Noel Vanstone

rang the bell. On this occasion, the summons was answered by Louisa.

“Get the spare room ready,” said her master ; “this lady will sleep here to-night. And air my warm things ; this lady and I are going away to-morrow morning.”

The civil and submissive Louisa received her orders in sullen silence—darted an angry look at her master’s impenetrable guest—and left the room. The servants were evidently all attached to their mistress’s interests, and were all of one opinion on the subject of Mrs. Lecount.

“That’s done !” said Noel Vanstone, with a sigh of infinite relief. “Come and sit down, Lecount. Let’s be comfortable—let’s gossip over the fire.”

Mrs. Lecount accepted the invitation ; and drew an easy-chair to his side. He took her hand with a confidential tenderness, and held it in his, while the talk went on. A stranger, looking in through the window, would have taken them for mother and son ; and would have thought to himself, “What a happy home !”

The gossip, led by Noel Vanstone, consisted as usual of an endless string of questions, and was devoted entirely to the subject of himself and his future prospects. Where would Lecount take him to, when they went away the next morning ? Why to London ? Why should he be left in London, while Lecount went on to St. Crux to give the admiral the Letter and the Will ? Because his wife might follow him, if he went to the admiral’s ? Well, there was something in that. And because he ought to be safely concealed from her, in

some comfortable lodging, near Mr. Loscombe? Why near Mr. Loscombe? Ah, yes, to be sure—to know what the law would do to help him. Would the law set him free from the Wretch who had deceived him? How tiresome of Lecount not to know! Would the law say he had gone and married himself a second time, because he had been living with the Wretch, like husband and wife, in Scotland? Anything that publicly assumed to be a marriage, was a marriage (he had heard) in Scotland. How excessively tiresome of Lecount to sit there, and say she knew nothing about it! Was he to stay long in London, by himself, with nobody but Mr. Loscombe to speak to? Would Lecount come back to him, as soon as she had put those important papers in the admiral's own hands? Would Lecount consider herself still in his service? The good Lecount! the excellent Lecount! And, after all the law-business was over—what then? Why not leave this horrid England, and go abroad again? Why not go to France, to some cheap place, near Paris? Say Versailles? say St. Germain? In a nice little French house—cheap? With a nice French *bonne* to cook—who wouldn't waste his substance in the grease-pot? With a nice little garden—where he could work himself, and get health, and save the expense of keeping a gardener? It wasn't a bad idea. And it seemed to promise well for the future—didn't it, Lecount?

So he ran on—the poor, weak creature! the abject, miserable little man!

As the darkness gathered, at the close of the short November day, he began to grow drowsy—his ceaseless questions came to an end at last—he fell asleep. The wind outside sang its mournful winter-song; the tramp of passing footsteps, the roll of passing wheels on the road, ceased in dreary silence. He slept on quietly. The fire-light rose and fell on his wizen little face, and his nerveless drooping hands. Mrs. Lecount had not pitied him yet. She began to pity him, now. Her point was gained; her interest in his will was secured; he had put his future life, of his own accord, under her fostering care—the fire was comfortable; the circumstances were favourable to the growth of Christian feeling. “Poor wretch!” said Mrs. Lecount, looking at him with a grave compassion—“Poor wretch!”

The dinner-hour roused him. He was cheerful at dinner; he reverted to the idea of the cheap little house in France; he smirked and simpered; and talked French to Mrs. Lecount, while the housemaid and Louisa waited, turn and turn about, under protest. When dinner was over he returned to his comfortable chair before the fire, and Mrs. Lecount followed him. He resumed the conversation—which meant, in his case, repeating his questions. But he was not so quick and ready with them, as he had been earlier in the day. They began to flag—they continued, at longer and longer intervals—they ceased altogether. Towards nine o'clock he fell asleep again.

It was not a quiet sleep this time. He muttered,

and ground his teeth, and rolled his head from side to side of the chair. Mrs. Lecount purposely made noise enough to rouse him. He woke with a vacant eye, and a flushed cheek. He walked about the room restlessly, with a new idea in his mind—the idea of writing a terrible letter; a letter of eternal farewell to his wife. How was it to be written? In what language should he express his feelings? The powers of Shakespeare himself would be unequal to the emergency! He had been the victim of an outrage entirely without parallel. A wretch had crept into his bosom! A viper had hidden herself at his fireside! Where could words be found to brand her with the infamy she deserved? He stopped, with a suffocating sense in him of his own impotent rage—he stopped, and shook his fist tremulously in the empty air.

Mrs. Lecount interfered with an energy and a resolution inspired by serious alarm. After the heavy strain that had been laid on his weakness already, such an outbreak of passionate agitation as was now bursting from him, might be the destruction of his rest that night, and of his strength to travel the next day. With infinite difficulty, with endless promises to return to the subject, and to advise him about it in the morning, she prevailed on him, at last, to go up stairs and compose himself for the night. She gave him her arm to assist him. On the way up-stairs, his attention, to her great relief, became suddenly absorbed by a new fancy. He remembered a certain warm and comforting mixture of wine, egg, sugar, and spices, which she

had often been accustomed to make for him, in former times ; and which he thought he should relish exceedingly, before he went to bed. Mrs. Lecount helped him on with his dressing-gown—then went down stairs again, to make his warm drink for him at the parlour fire.

She rang the bell, and ordered the necessary ingredients for the mixture, in Noel Vanstone's name. The servants, with the small ingenious malice of their race, brought up the materials, one by one, and kept her waiting for each of them as long as possible. She had got the saucepan, and the spoon, and the tumbler, and the nutmeg-grater, and the wine—but not the egg, the sugar, or the spices—when she heard him above, walking backwards and forwards noisily in his room ; exciting himself on the old subject again, beyond all doubt.

She went up-stairs once more ; but he was too quick for her—he heard her outside the door ; and when she opened it, she found him in his chair, with his back cunningly turned towards her. Knowing him too well to attempt any remonstrance, she merely announced the speedy arrival of the warm drink, and turned to leave the room. On her way out, she noticed a table in a corner, with an inkstand and a paper-case on it, and tried, without attracting his attention, to take the writing materials away. He was too quick for her again. He asked angrily, if she doubted his promise. She put the writing materials back on the table, for fear of offending him, and left the room.

In half an hour more, the mixture was ready. She carried it up to him, foaming and fragrant, in a large tumbler. "He will sleep after this," she thought to herself, as she opened the door; "I have made it stronger than usual on purpose."

He had changed his place. He was sitting at the table in the corner—still with his back to her, writing. This time, his quick ears had not served him. This time, she had caught him in the fact.

"Oh, Mr. Noel! Mr. Noel!" she said, reproachfully, "what is your promise worth?"

He made no answer. He was sitting with his left elbow on the table, and with his head resting on his left hand. His right hand lay back on the paper, with the pen lying loose in it. "Your drink, Mr. Noel," she said in a kinder tone, feeling unwilling to offend him. He took no notice of her.

She went to the table to rouse him. Was he deep in thought?

He was dead.

THE END OF THE FIFTH SCENE.

BETWEEN THE SCENES.



PROGRESS OF THE STORY THROUGH THE
POST.

BETWEEN THE SCENES.

I.

FROM MRS. NOEL VANSTONE TO MR. LOSCOMBE.

“Park Terrace, St. John’s Wood,

“November 5th.

“DEAR SIR,

“I came to London yesterday, for the purpose of seeing a relative, leaving Mr. Vanstone at Baliol Cottage, and proposing to return to him in the course of the week. I reached London late last night, and drove to these lodgings, having written to secure accommodation beforehand.

“This morning’s post has brought me a letter from my own maid, whom I left at Baliol Cottage, with instructions to write to me if anything extraordinary took place in my absence. You will find the girl’s letter enclosed in this. I have had some experience of her; and I believe she is to be strictly depended on to tell the truth.

“I purposely abstain from troubling you by any useless allusions to myself. When you have read my

maid's letter, you will understand the shock which the news contained in it has caused me. I can only repeat, that I place implicit belief in her statement. I am firmly persuaded that my husband's former house-keeper has found him out, has practised on his weakness in my absence, and has prevailed on him to make another Will. From what I know of this woman, I feel no doubt that she has used her influence over Mr. Vanstone, to deprive me, if possible, of all future interest in my husband's fortune.

"Under such circumstances as these, it is in the last degree important—for more reasons than I need mention here—that I should see Mr. Vanstone, and come to an explanation with him, at the earliest possible opportunity. You will find that my maid thoughtfully kept her letter open, until the last moment before post-time—without, however, having any later news to give me than that Mrs. Lecount was to sleep at the cottage last night, and that she and Mr. Vanstone were to leave together this morning. But for that last piece of intelligence, I should have been on my way back to Scotland before now. As it is, I cannot decide for myself what I ought to do next. My going back to Dumfries, after Mr. Vanstone has left it, seems like taking a journey for nothing—and my staying in London appears to be almost equally useless.

"Will you kindly advise me, in this difficulty? I will come to you at Lincoln's Inn at any time this afternoon or to-morrow which you may appoint. My next few hours are engaged. As soon as this letter is

despatched, I am going to Kensington, with the object of ascertaining whether certain doubts I feel, about the means by which Mrs. Lecount may have accomplished her discovery, are well founded or not. If you will let me have your answer by return of post, I will not fail to get back to St. John's Wood in time to receive it.

“Believe me, dear Sir, yours sincerely,

“MAGDALEN VANSTONE.”

II.

FROM MR. LOSCOMBE TO MRS. NOEL VANSTONE.

“Lincoln's Inn, Nov. 5th.

“DEAR MADAM,

“Your letter and its enclosure have caused me great concern and surprise. Pressure of business allows me no hope of being able to see you either to-day or to-morrow morning. But if three o'clock to-morrow afternoon will suit you, at that hour you will find me at your service.

“I cannot pretend to offer a positive opinion, until I know more of the particulars connected with this extraordinary business than I find communicated either in your letter, or in your maid's. But with this reserve, I venture to suggest that your remaining in London until to-morrow, may possibly lead to other results besides your consultation at my chambers. There is at least a chance that you, or I, may hear something further in this strange matter by the morning's post.

“I remain, dear Madam, faithfully yours,

“JOHN LOSCOMBE.”

III.

FROM MRS. NOEL VANSTONE TO MISS GARTH.

“ November 5th, Two o’Clock.

“ I have just returned from Westmoreland House —after purposely leaving it in secret, and purposely avoiding you under your own roof. You shall know why I came, and why I went away. It is due to my remembrance of old times not to treat you like a stranger, although I can never again treat you like a friend.

“ I set forth on the third from the North to London. My only object in taking this long journey, was to see Norah. I had been suffering for many weary weeks past, such remorse as only miserable women like me can feel. Perhaps, the suffering weakened me ; perhaps, it roused some old forgotten tenderness—God knows !—I can’t explain it ; I can only tell you that I began to think of Norah by day, and to dream of Norah by night, till I was almost heart-broken. I have no better reason than this to give for running all the risks which I ran, and coming to London to see her. I don’t wish to claim more for myself than I deserve ; I don’t wish to tell you I was the reformed and repenting creature whom *you* might have approved. I had only one feeling in me that I know of. I wanted to put my arms round Norah’s neck, and cry my heart out on Norah’s bosom. Childish enough, I dare say. Something might have come of it ; nothing might have come of it—who knows ?

“ I had no means of finding Norah without your

assistance. However you might disapprove of what I had done, I thought you would not refuse to help me to find my sister. When I lay down, last night, in my strange bed, I said to myself, 'I will ask Miss Garth, for my father's sake and my mother's sake, to tell me.' You don't know what a comfort I felt in that thought. How should you? What do good women like you, know of miserable sinners like me? All you know is that you pray for us at church.

"Well, I fell asleep happily that night—for the first time since my marriage. When the morning came, I paid the penalty of daring to be happy, only for one night. When the morning came, a letter came with it, which told me that my bitterest enemy on earth (you have meddled sufficiently with my affairs to know what enemy I mean) had revenged herself on me in my absence. In following the impulse which led me to my sister, I had gone to my ruin.

"The mischief was beyond all present remedy, when I received the news of it. Whatever had happened, whatever might happen, I made up my mind to persist in my resolution of seeing Norah, before I did anything else. I suspected *you* of being concerned in the disaster which had overtaken me—because I felt positively certain at Aldborough, that you and Mrs. Lecount had written to each other. But I never suspected Norah. If I lay on my death-bed at this moment, I could say with a safe conscience, I never suspected Norah.

"So I went this morning to Westmoreland House to ask you for my sister's address, and to acknowledge

plainly that I suspected you of being again in correspondence with Mrs. Lecount.

“When I inquired for you at the door, they told me you had gone out, but that you were expected back before long. They asked me if I would see your sister, who was then in the schoolroom. I desired that your sister should on no account be disturbed: my business was not with her, but with you. I begged to be allowed to wait in a room by myself, until you returned.

“They showed me into the double room on the ground floor, divided by curtains—as it was when I last remember it. There was a fire in the outer division of the room, but none in the inner; and for that reason, I suppose, the curtains were drawn. The servant was very civil and attentive to me. I have learnt to be thankful for civility and attention, and I spoke to her as cheerfully as I could. I said to her, ‘I shall see Miss Garth here, as she comes up to the door, and I can beckon her in, through the long window.’ The servant said I could do so, if you came that way—but that you let yourself in sometimes, with your own key, by the back-garden gate; and if you did this, she would take care to let you know of my visit. I mention these trifles, to show you that there was no premeditated deceit in my mind when I came to the house.

“I waited a weary time, and you never came: I don’t know whether my impatience made me think so, or whether the large fire burning made the room really

as hot as I felt it to be—I only know that, after a while, I passed through the curtains into the inner room, to try the cooler atmosphere.

“I walked to the long window which leads into the back garden, to look out; and almost at the same time, I heard the door opened—the door of the room I had just left—and your voice and the voice of some other woman, a stranger to me, talking. The stranger was one of the parlour-boarders, I dare say. I gathered from the first words you exchanged together, that you had met in the passage—she, on her way down stairs, and you, on your way in from the back garden. Her next question and your next answer, informed me that this person was a friend of my sister’s, who felt a strong interest in her, and who knew that you had just returned from a visit to Norah. So far, I only hesitated to show myself, because I shrank, in my painful situation, from facing a stranger. But when I heard my own name immediately afterwards on your lips and on hers—then, I purposely came nearer to the curtain between us, and purposely listened.

“A mean action, you will say? Call it mean, if you like. What better can you expect from such a woman as I am?

“You were always famous for your memory. There is no necessity for my repeating the words you spoke to your friend, and the words your friend spoke to you, hardly an hour since. When you read these lines, you will know, as well as I know, what those words told me. I ask for no particulars; I will take all your

reasons and all your excuses for granted. It is enough for me to know that you and Mr. Pendril have been searching for me again, and that Norah is in the conspiracy this time, to reclaim me in spite of myself. It is enough for me to know, that my letter to my sister has been turned into a trap to catch me, and that Mrs. Lecount's revenge has accomplished its object by means of information received from Norah's lips.

"Shall I tell you what I suffered, when I heard these things? No: it would only be a waste of time to tell you. Whatever I suffer, I deserve it—don't I?

"I waited in that inner room—knowing my own violent temper, and not trusting myself to see you, after what I had heard—I waited in that inner room, trembling lest the servant should tell you of my visit, before I could find an opportunity of leaving the house. No such misfortune happened. The servant, no doubt, heard the voices up stairs, and supposed that we had met each other in the passage. I don't know how long, or how short a time it was, before you left the room to go and take off your bonnet—you went and your friend went with you. I raised the long window softly, and stepped into the back garden. The way by which you returned to the house, was the way by which I left it. No blame attaches to the servant. As usual, where I am concerned, nobody is to blame but me.

"Time enough has passed now to quiet my mind a little. You know how strong I am? You remember how I used to fight against all my illnesses, when I was a child? Now I am a woman, I fight against my

miseries in the same way. Don't pity me, Miss Garth ! Don't pity me !

"I have no harsh feeling against Norah. The hope I had of seeing her, is a hope taken from me ; the consolation I had in writing to her, is a consolation denied me for the future. I am cut to the heart—but I have no angry feeling towards my sister. She means well, poor soul—I dare say she means well. It would distress her, if she knew what has happened. Don't tell her. Conceal my visit, and burn my letter.

"A last word to yourself and I have done :—

"If I rightly understand my present situation, your spies are still searching for me to just as little purpose as they searched at York. Dismiss them—you are wasting your money to no purpose. If you discovered me to-morrow, what could you do? My position has altered. I am no longer the poor outcast girl, the vagabond public performer, whom you once hunted after. I have done, what I told you I would do—I have made the general sense of propriety my accomplice this time. Do you know who I am? I am a respectable married woman, accountable for my actions to nobody under heaven but my husband. I have got a place in the world, and a name in the world, at last. Even the law, which is the friend of all you respectable people, has recognized my existence, and has become *my* friend too! The Archbishop of Canterbury gave me his licence to be married, and the vicar of Aldborough performed the service. If I found your spies following me in the street, and if I chose to claim pro-

tection from them, the law would acknowledge my claim. You forget what wonders my wickedness has done for me. It has made Nobody's Child, Somebody's Wife.

"If you will give these considerations their due weight; if you will exert your excellent common sense, I have no fear of being obliged to appeal to my newly-found friend and protector—the law. You will feel, by this time, that you have meddled with me at last to some purpose. I am estranged from Norah—I am discovered by my husband—I am defeated by Mrs. Lecount. You have driven me to the last extremity; you have strengthened me to fight the battle of my life, with the resolution which only a lost and friendless woman can feel. Badly as your schemes have prospered, they have not proved totally useless after all!

"I have no more to say. If you ever speak about me to Norah, tell her that a day may come when she will see me again—the day when we two sisters have recovered our natural rights; the day when I put Norah's fortune into Norah's hand.

"Those are my last words. Remember them the next time you feel tempted to meddle with me again.

"MAGDALEN VANSTONE."

IV.

FROM MR. LOSCOMBE TO MRS. NOEL VANSTONE.

"Lincoln's Inn, November 6th.

"DEAR MADAM,

"This morning's post has doubtless brought you the same shocking news which it has brought to me.

You must know, by this time, that a terrible affliction has befallen you—the affliction of your husband's sudden death.

“I am on the point of starting for the North, to make all needful inquiries, and to perform whatever duties I may with propriety undertake, as solicitor to the deceased gentleman. Let me earnestly recommend you not to follow me to Baliol Cottage, until I have had time to write to you first, and to give you such advice as I cannot, through ignorance of all the circumstances, pretend to offer now. You may rely on my writing after my arrival in Scotland, by the first post.

“I remain, dear Madam, faithfully yours,

‘JOHN LOSCOMBE.’”

V.

FROM MR. PENDRIL TO MISS GARTH.

“Searle Street, Nov. 6th.

“DEAR MISS GARTH,

“I return you Mrs. Noel Vanstone's letter. I can understand your mortification at the tone in which it is written, and your distress at the manner in which this unhappy woman has interpreted the conversation that she overheard at your house. I cannot honestly add that I lament what has happened. My opinion has never altered since the Combe-Raven time. I believe Mrs. Noel Vanstone to be one of the most reckless, desperate, and perverted women living; and any cir-

cumstances that estrange her from her sister, are circumstances which I welcome, for her sister's sake.

“There cannot be a moment's doubt on the course you ought to follow in this matter. Even Mrs. Noel Vanstone herself acknowledges the propriety of sparing her sister additional, and unnecessary, distress. By all means, keep Miss Vanstone in ignorance of the visit to Kensington, and of the letter which has followed it. It would be not only unwise, but absolutely cruel, to enlighten her. If we had any remedy to apply, or even any hope to offer, we might feel some hesitation in keeping our secret. But there is no remedy, and no hope. Mrs. Noel Vanstone is perfectly justified in the view she takes of her own position. Neither you nor I can assert the smallest right to control her.

“I have already taken the necessary measures for putting an end to our useless inquiries. In a few days I will write to Miss Vanstone, and will do my best to tranquillize her mind on the subject of her sister. If I can find no sufficient excuse to satisfy her, it will be better she should think we have discovered nothing, than that she should know the truth.

“Believe me, most truly yours,

“WILLIAM PENDRIL.”

VI.

FROM MR. LOSCOMBE TO MRS. NOEL VANSTONE.

“Lincoln’s Inn, Nov. 15th.

“Private.

“DEAR MADAM,

“In compliance with your request, I now proceed to communicate to you in writing, what (but for the calamity which has so recently befallen you) I should have preferred communicating by word of mouth. Be pleased to consider this letter as strictly confidential between yourself and me.

“I enclose, at your desire, a copy of the Will executed by your late husband on the third of this month. There can be no question of the genuineness of the original document. I protested, as a matter of form, against Admiral Bartram’s solicitor assuming a position of authority at Baliol Cottage. But he took the position, nevertheless; acting as legal representative of the sole Executor under the second Will. I am bound to say I should have done the same myself in his place.

“The serious question follows—what can we do for the best, in your interests? The Will executed under my professional superintendence, on the thirtieth of September last, is at present superseded and revoked by the second and later Will, executed on the third of November. Can we dispute this document?

“I doubt the possibility of disputing the new Will, on the face of it. It is no doubt irregularly expressed

—but it is dated, signed, and witnessed as the law directs; and the perfectly simple and straightforward provisions that it contains, are in no respect, that I can see, technically open to attack.

“This being the case, can we dispute the Will, on the ground that it has been executed when the Testator was not in a fit state to dispose of his own property? or when the Testator was subjected to undue and improper influence?

“In the first of these cases, the medical evidence would put an obstacle in our way. We cannot assert that previous illness had weakened the Testator’s mind. It is clear that he died suddenly, as the doctors had all along declared he would die, of disease of the heart. He was out walking in his garden, as usual, on the day of his death; he ate a hearty dinner; none of the persons in his service noticed any change in him; he was a little more irritable with them than usual, but that was all. It is impossible to attack the state of his faculties: there is no case to go into court with, so far.

“Can we declare that he acted under undue influence—or, in plainer terms, under the influence of Mrs. Lecount?

“There are serious difficulties, again, in the way of taking this course. We cannot assert, for example, that Mrs. Lecount has assumed a place in the will, which she has no fair claim to occupy. She has cunningly limited her own legacy, not only to what is fairly her due, but to what the late Mr. Michael Van-

stone himself had the intention of leaving her. If I were examined on the subject, I should be compelled to acknowledge that I had heard him express this intention myself. It is only the truth to say, that I have heard him express it more than once. There is no point of attack in Mrs. Lecount's legacy; and there is no point of attack in your late husband's choice of an executor. He has made the wise choice, and the natural choice, of the oldest and trustiest friend he had in the world.

“One more consideration remains—the most important which I have yet approached, and therefore the consideration which I have reserved to the last. On the thirtieth of September, the Testator executes a will, leaving his widow sole executrix, with a legacy of eighty thousand pounds. On the third of November following, he expressly revokes this will, and leaves another in its stead, in which his widow is never once mentioned, and in which the whole residue of his estate, after payment of one comparatively trifling legacy, is left to a friend.

“It rests entirely with you to say, whether any valid reason can, or can not, be produced to explain such an extraordinary proceeding as this. If no reason can be assigned—and I know of none myself—I think we have a point here, which deserves our careful consideration; for it may be a point which is open to attack. Pray understand that I am now appealing to you solely as a lawyer, who is obliged to look all possible eventualities in the face. I have no wish to in-

trude on your private affairs ; I have no wish to write a word which could be construed into any indirect reflection on yourself.

“ If you tell me that so far as you know, your husband capriciously struck you out of his will, without assignable reason or motive for doing so, and without other obvious explanation of his conduct, than that he acted in this matter entirely under the influence of Mrs. Lecount—I will immediately take Counsel’s opinion touching the propriety of disputing the will on this ground. If, on the other hand, you tell me that there are reasons (known to yourself though unknown to me) for not taking the course I propose, I will accept that intimation without troubling you, unless you wish it, to explain yourself further. In this latter event, I will write to you again—for I shall then have something more to say, which may greatly surprise you, on the subject of the Will.

“ Faithfully yours,

“ JOHN LOSCOMBE.”

VI.

FROM MRS. NOEL VANSTONE TO MR. LOSCOMBE.

“ Nov. 16th.

“ DEAR SIR,

“ Accept my best thanks for the kindness and consideration with which you have treated me—and let the anxieties under which I am now suffering plead my

excuse, if I reply to your letter without ceremony, in the fewest possible words.

“I have my own reasons for not hesitating to answer your question in the negative. It is impossible for us to go to law, as you propose, on the subject of the Will.

“Believe me, dear Sir, yours gratefully,

“MAGDALEN VANSTONE.”

VII.

FROM MR. LOSCOMBE TO MRS. NOEL VANSTONE.

“Lincoln’s Inn, November 17th.

“DEAR MADAM,

“I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your letter, answering my proposal in the negative, for reasons of your own. Under these circumstances—on which I offer no comment—I beg to perform my promise of again communicating with you, on the subject of your late husband’s Will.

“Be so kind as to look at your copy of the document. You will find that the clause which devises the whole residue of your husband’s estate to Admiral Bartram, ends in these terms : *to be by him applied to such uses as he may think fit.*

“Simple as they may seem to you, these are very remarkable words. In the first place, no practical lawyer would have used them, in drawing your husband’s will. In the second place, they are utterly useless to serve any plain straightforward purpose.

The legacy is left unconditionally to the admiral ; and in the same breath he is told that he may do what he likes with it ! The phrase points clearly to one of two conclusions. It has either dropped from the writer's pen in pure ignorance—or it has been carefully set where it appears, to serve the purpose of a snare. I am firmly persuaded that the latter explanation is the right one. The words are expressly intended to mislead some person—yourself in all probability—and the cunning which has put them to that use, is a cunning which (as constantly happens when uninstructed persons meddle with law) has overreached itself. My thirty years' experience reads those words in a sense exactly opposite to the sense which they are intended to convey. I say that Admiral Bartram is *not* free to apply his legacy to such purposes as he may think fit—I believe he is privately controlled by a supplementary document in the shape of a Secret Trust.

“I can easily explain to you what I mean by a Secret Trust. It is usually contained in the form of a letter from a Testator to his Executors, privately informing them of testamentary intentions on his part, which he has not thought proper openly to acknowledge in his will. I leave you a hundred pounds ; and I write a private letter, enjoining you, on taking the legacy, not to devote it to your own purposes, but to give it to some third person, whose name I have my own reasons for not mentioning in my will. That is a Secret Trust.

“If I am right in my own persuasion that such a

document as I here describe is at this moment in Admiral Bartram's possession—a persuasion based, in the first instance, on the extraordinary words that I have quoted to you, and, in the second instance, on purely legal considerations with which it is needless to encumber my letter—if I am right in this opinion, the discovery of the Secret Trust would be, in all probability, a most important discovery to your interests. I will not trouble you with technical reasons, or with references to my experience in these matters, which only a professional man could understand. I will merely say that I don't give up your cause as utterly lost, until the conviction now impressed on my own mind is proved to be wrong.

“I can add no more, while this important question still remains involved in doubt ; neither can I suggest any means of solving that doubt. If the existence of the Trust was proved, and if the nature of the stipulations contained in it was made known to me, I could then say positively what the legal chances were of your being able to set up a Case on the strength of it : and I could also tell you, whether I should or should not, feel justified in personally undertaking that Case, under a private arrangement with yourself.

“As things are, I can make no arrangement, and offer no advice. I can only put you confidentially in possession of my private opinion ; leaving you entirely free to draw your own inferences from it ; and regretting that I cannot write more confidently and more definitely than I have written here. All that I could

conscientiously say on this very difficult and delicate subject, I have said.

“Believe me, dear Madam, faithfully yours,

“JOHN LOSCOMBE.

“P.S.—I omitted one consideration in my last letter, which I may mention here, in order to show you that no point in connection with the case has escaped me. If it had been possible to show that Mr. Vanstone was *domiciled* in Scotland at the time of his death, we might have asserted your interests by means of the Scotch law—which does not allow a husband the power of absolutely disinheriting his wife. But it is impossible to assert that Mr. Vanstone was legally domiciled in Scotland. He came there as a visitor only ; he occupied a furnished house for the season ; and he never expressed, either by word or deed, the slightest intention of settling permanently in the North.”

VIII.

FROM MRS. NOEL VANSTONE TO MR. LOSCOMBE.

“DEAR SIR,

“I have read your letter more than once, with the deepest interest and attention—and the oftener I read it, the more firmly I believe that there is really such a Letter as you mention in Admiral Bartram’s hands.

“It is my interest that the discovery should be made—and I at once acknowledge to you, that I am deter-

mined to find the means of secretly and certainly making it. My resolution rests on other motives than the motives which you might naturally suppose would influence me. I only tell you this, in case you feel inclined to remonstrate. There is good reason for what I say, when I assure you that remonstrance will be useless.

“I ask for no assistance in this matter; I will trouble nobody for advice. You shall not be involved in any rash proceedings on my part. Whatever danger there may be, I will risk it. Whatever delays may happen, I will bear them patiently. I am lonely and friendless and sorely troubled in mind—but I am strong enough to win my way through worse trials than these. My spirits will rise again, and my time will come. If that Secret Trust is in Admiral Bartram’s possession—when you next see me, you shall see me with it in my own hands.

“Yours gratefully,

“MAGDALEN VANSTONE.”

THE SIXTH SCENE.



ST. JOHN'S WOOD.

THE SIXTH SCENE.



CHAPTER I.

IT wanted little more than a fortnight to Christmas ; but the weather showed no signs yet of the frost and snow, conventionally associated with the coming season. The atmosphere was unnaturally warm ; and the old year was dying feebly in sapping rain and encervating mist.

Towards the close of the December afternoon, Magdalen sat alone in the lodging which she had occupied since her arrival in London. The fire burnt sluggishly in the narrow little grate ; the view of the wet houses and soaking gardens opposite was darkening fast ; and the bell of the suburban muffin-boy tinkled in the distance drearily. Sitting close over the fire, with a little money lying loose in her lap, Magdalen absently shifted the coins to and fro on the smooth surface of her dress ; incessantly altering their positions towards each other, as if they were pieces of a “child’s puzzle” which she was trying to put together. The dim firelight flaming up on her faintly from time to

time, showed changes which would have told their own tale sadly to friends of former days. Her dress had become loose through the wasting of her figure: but she had not cared to alter it. The old restlessness in her movements, the old mobility in her expression, appeared no more. Her face passively maintained its haggard composure, its changeless unnatural calm. Mr. Pendril might have softened his hard sentence on her, if he had seen her now; and Mrs. Lecount, in the plenitude of her triumph, might have pitied her fallen enemy at last.

Hardly four months had passed, since the wedding-day at Aldborough; and the penalty for that day was paid already—paid in unavailing remorse, in hopeless isolation, in irremediable defeat! Let this be said for her; let the truth which has been told of the fault, be told of the expiation as well. Let it be recorded of her that she enjoyed no secret triumph on the day of her success. The horror of herself with which her own act had inspired her, had risen to its climax when the design of her marriage was achieved. She had never suffered in secret, as she suffered when the Combe-Raven money was left to her in her husband's will. She had never felt the means taken to accomplish her end so unutterably degrading to herself, as she felt them on the day when the end was reached. Out of that feeling had grown the remorse, which had hurried her to seek pardon and consolation in her sister's love. Never since it had first entered her heart, never since she had first felt it sacred to her at

her father's grave, had the Purpose to which she had vowed herself, so nearly lost its hold on her as at this time. Never might Norah's influence have achieved such good, as on the day when that influence was lost—the day when the fatal words were overheard at Miss Garth's—the day when the fatal letter from Scotland told of Mrs. Lecount's revenge.

The harm was done; the chance was gone. Time and Hope alike, had both passed her by.

Faintly and more faintly, the inner voices now pleaded with her to pause on the downward way. The discovery which had poisoned her heart with its first distrust of her sister; the tidings which had followed it of her husband's death; the sting of Mrs. Lecount's triumph, felt through all—had done their work. The remorse which had embittered her married life, was deadened now to a dull despair. It was too late to make the atonement of confession—too late to lay bare to the miserable husband, the deeper secrets that had once lurked in the heart of the miserable wife. Innocent of all thought of the hideous treachery which Mrs. Lecount had imputed to her—she was guilty of knowing how his health was broken when she married him; guilty of knowing, when he left her the Combe-Raven money, that the accident of a moment, harmless to other men, might place his life in jeopardy, and effect her release. His death had told her this—had told her plainly, what she had shrunk, in his lifetime, from openly acknowledging to herself. From the dull torment of that reproach; from the dreary wretched-

ness of doubting everybody, even to Norah herself; from the bitter sense of her defeated schemes; from the blank solitude of her friendless life—what refuge was left? But one refuge now. She turned to the relentless Purpose which was hurrying her to her ruin, and cried to it with the daring of her despair—Drive me on!

For days and days together, she had bent her mind on the one object which occupied it, since she had received the lawyer's letter. For days and days together, she had toiled to meet the first necessity of her position—to find a means of discovering the Secret Trust. There was no hope, this time, of assistance from Captain Wragge. Long practice had made the old militiaman an adept in the art of vanishing. The plough of the moral agriculturist left no furrows—not a trace of him was to be found! Mr. Loscombe was too cautious to commit himself to an active course of any kind: he passively maintained his opinion, and left the rest to his client—he desired to know nothing, until the Trust was placed in his hands. Magdalen's interests were now in Magdalen's own sole care. Risk, or no risk, what she did next, she must do by herself.

The prospect had not daunted her. Alone, she had calculated the chances that might be tried. Alone, she was now determined to make the attempt.

“The time has come,” she said to herself, as she sat over the fire. “I must sound Louisa first.”

She collected the scattered coins in her lap, and placed them in a little heap on the table—then rose, and rang the bell. The landlady answered it.

"Is my servant down stairs?" inquired Magdalen.

"Yes, ma'am. She is having her tea."

"When she has done, say I want her up here. Wait a moment. You will find your money on the table—the money I owe you for last week. Can you find it? or would you like to have a candle?"

"It's rather dark, ma'am."

Magdalen lit a candle. "What notice must I give you," she asked, as she put the candle on the table, "before I leave?"

"A week is the usual notice, ma'am. I hope you have no objection to make to the house?"

"None whatever. I only ask the question, because I may be obliged to leave these lodgings rather sooner than I anticipated. Is the money right?"

"Quite right, ma'am. Here is your receipt."

"Thank you. Don't forget to send Louisa to me, as soon as she has done her tea."

The landlady withdrew. As soon as she was alone again, Magdalen extinguished the candle, and drew an empty chair close to her own chair, on the hearth. This done, she resumed her former place, and waited until Louisa appeared. There was doubt in her face, as she sat looking mechanically into the fire. "A poor chance," she thought to herself; "but, poor as it is, a chance that I must try."

In ten minutes more, Louisa's meek knock was softly audible outside. She was surprised on entering the room, to find no other light in it than the light of the fire.

"Will you have the candles, ma'am?" she inquired respectfully.

"We will have candles if you wish for them yourself," replied Magdalen; "not otherwise. I have something to say to you. When I have said it, you shall decide whether we sit together in the dark or in the light."

Louisa waited near the door, and listened to those strange words in silent astonishment.

"Come here," said Magdalen, pointing to the empty chair; "come here and sit down."

Louisa advanced, and timidly removed the chair from its position at her mistress's side. Magdalen instantly drew it back again. "No!" she said. "Come closer—come close by me." After a moment's hesitation, Louisa obeyed.

"I ask you to sit near me," pursued Magdalen, "because I wish to speak to you on equal terms. Whatever distinctions there might once have been between us, are now at an end. I am a lonely woman thrown helpless on my own resources, without rank or place in the world. I may or may not keep you as my friend. As mistress and maid, the connection between us must come to an end."

"Oh, ma'am, don't, don't say that!" pleaded Louisa, faintly.

Magdalen sorrowfully and steadily went on.

"When you first came to [me," she resumed, "I thought I should not like you. I have learnt to like you—I have learnt to be grateful to you. From first

to last you have been faithful and good to me. The least I can do in return, is not to stand in the way of your future prospects."

"Don't send me away, ma'am!" said Louisa, imploringly. "If you can only help me with a little money now and then, I'll wait for my wages—I will indeed."

Magdalen took her hand, and went on, as sorrowfully and as steadily as before.

"My future life is all darkness, all uncertainty," she said. "The next step I take, may lead me to my prosperity or may lead me to my ruin. Can I ask you to share such a prospect as this? If your future was as uncertain as mine is—if you, too, were a friendless woman thrown on the world—my conscience might be easy in letting you cast your lot with mine. I might accept your attachment, for I might feel I was not wronging you. How can I feel this in your case? You have a future to look to. You are an excellent servant; you can get another place—a far better place than mine. You can refer to me; and if the character I give is not considered sufficient, you can refer to the mistress you served before me——"

At the instant when that reference to the girl's last employer escaped Magdalen's lips, Louisa snatched her hand away, and started up affrightedly from her chair. There was a moment's silence. Both mistress and maid were equally taken by surprise.

Magdalen was the first to recover herself.

"Is it getting too dark?" she asked, signifi-

cantly. "Are you going to light the candles, after all?"

Louisa drew back into the dimmest corner of the room.

"You suspect me, ma'am!" she answered out of the darkness, in a breathless whisper. "Who has told you? How did you find out——?" She stopped, and burst into tears. "I deserve your suspicion," she said, struggling to compose herself. "I can't deny it to *you*. You have treated me so kindly; you have made me so fond of you! Forgive me, Mrs. Vanstone—I am a wretch; I have deceived you."

"Come here, and sit down by me again," said Magdalen. "Come—or I will get up myself, and bring you back."

Louisa slowly returned to her place. Dim as the firelight was, she seemed to fear it. She held her handkerchief over her face, and shrank from her mistress as she seated herself again in the chair.

"You are wrong in thinking that any one has betrayed you to me," said Magdalen. "All that I know of you is, what your own looks and ways have told me. You have had some secret trouble weighing on your mind, ever since you have been in my service. I confess I have spoken with the wish to find out more of you and your past life than I have found out yet—not because I am curious, but because I have my secret troubles too. Are you an unhappy woman, like me? If you are, I will take you into my confidence. If you have nothing to tell me—if you choose to keep your

secret—I don't blame you ; I only say, Let us part. I won't ask how you have deceived me. I will only remember that you have been an honest and faithful and competent servant, while I have employed you—and I will say as much in your favour to any new mistress you like to send to me."

She waited for the reply. For a moment, and only for a moment, Louisa hesitated. The girl's nature was weak, but not depraved. She was honestly attached to her mistress ; and she spoke with a courage which Magdalen had not expected from her.

"If you send me away, ma'am," she said, "I won't take my character from you till I have told you the truth ; I won't return your kindness by deceiving you a second time. Did my master ever tell you how he engaged me ?"

"No. I never asked him, and he never told me."

"He engaged me, ma'am, with a written character——"

"Yes?"

"The character was a false one."

Magdalen drew back in amazement. The confession she heard, was not the confession she had anticipated.

"Did your mistress refuse to give you a character?" she asked. "Why?"

Louisa dropped on her knees, and hid her face in her mistress's lap. "Don't ask me!" she said. "I'm a miserable, degraded creature ; I'm not fit to be in the same room with you!"

Magdalen bent over her, and whispered a question

in her ear. Louisa whispered back the one sad word of reply.

"Has he deserted you?" asked Magdalen, after waiting a moment, and thinking first.

"No."

"Do you love him?"

"Dearly."

The remembrance of her own loveless marriage stung Magdalen to the quick.

"For God's sake, don't kneel to *me*!" she cried, passionately. "If there is a degraded woman in this room, I am the woman—not you!"

She raised the girl by main force from her knees, and put her back in the chair. They both waited a little in silence. Keeping her hand on Louisa's shoulder, Magdalen seated herself again, and looked with unutterable bitterness of sorrow into the dying fire. "Oh," she thought, "what happy women there are in the world! Wives who love their husbands! Mothers who are not ashamed to own their children! Are you quieter?" she asked, gently addressing Louisa once more. "Can you answer me, if I ask you something else? Where is the child?"

"The child is out at nurse."

"Does the father help to support it?"

"He does all he can, ma'am."

"What is he? Is he in service? Is he in a trade?"

"His father is a master-carpenter—he works in his father's yard."

"If he has got work, why has he not married you?"

“It is his father’s fault, ma’am—not his. His father has no pity on us. He would be turned out of house and home, if he married me.”

“Can he get no work elsewhere?”

“It’s hard to get good work in London, ma’am. There are so many in London—they take the bread out of each other’s mouths. If we had only had the money to emigrate, he would have married me long since.”

“Would he marry you, if you had the money now?”

“I am sure he would, ma’am. He could get plenty of work in Australia, and double and treble the wages he gets here. He is trying hard, and I am trying hard, to save a little towards it—I put by all I can spare from my child. But it is so little! If we live for years to come, there seems no hope for us. I know I have done wrong every way—I know I don’t deserve to be happy. But how could I let my child suffer?—I was obliged to go to service. My mistress was hard on me, and my health broke down in trying to live by my needle. I would never have deceived anybody by a false character, if there had been another chance for me. I was alone and helpless, ma’am; and I can only ask you to forgive me.”

“Ask better women than I am,” said Magdalen, sadly. “I am only fit to feel for you; and I do feel for you with all my heart. In your place I should have gone into service with a false character too. Say no more of the past—you don’t know how you hurt me in speaking of it. Talk of the future. I think I can

help you—and do you no harm. I think you can help me, and do me the greatest of all services, in return. Wait, and you shall hear what I mean. Suppose you were married—how much would it cost for you and your husband to emigrate?”

Louisa mentioned the cost of a steerage passage to Australia for a man and his wife. She spoke in low, hopeless tones. Moderate as the sum was, it looked like unattainable wealth in her eyes.

Magdalen started in her chair, and took the girl's hand once more.

“Louisa!” she said, earnestly. “If I gave you the money, what would you do for me in return?”

The proposal seemed to strike Louisa speechless with astonishment. She trembled violently, and said nothing. Magdalen repeated her words.

“Oh, ma'am, do you mean it?” said the girl. “Do you really mean it?”

“Yes,” replied Magdalen; “I really mean it. What would you do for me in return?”

“Do?” repeated Louisa. “Oh, what is there I would *not* do!” She tried to kiss her mistress's hand; but Magdalen would not permit it. She resolutely, almost roughly, drew her hand away.

“I am laying you under no obligation,” she said. “We are serving each other—that is all. Sit quiet, and let me think.”

For the next ten minutes there was silence in the room. At the end of that time, Magdalen took out her watch, and held it close to the grate. There was

just firelight enough to show her the hour. It was close on six o'clock.

“Are you composed enough to go down stairs, and deliver a message?” she asked, rising from her chair as she spoke to Louisa again. “It is a very simple message—it is only to tell the boy that I want a cab, as soon as he can get me one. I must go out immediately. You shall know why, later in the evening. I have much more to say to you—but there is no time to say it now. When I am gone, bring your work up here, and wait for my return. I shall be back before bedtime.”

Without another word of explanation, she hurriedly lit a candle, and withdrew into the bedroom to put on her bonnet and shawl.

CHAPTER II.

BETWEEN nine and ten o'clock the same evening, Louisa, waiting anxiously, heard the long-expected knock at the house door. She ran down stairs at once, and let her mistress in.

Magdalen's face was flushed. She showed far more agitation on returning to the house than she had shown on leaving it. "Keep your place at the table," she said to Louisa, impatiently; "but lay aside your work. I want you to attend carefully to what I am going to say."

Louisa obeyed. Magdalen seated herself at the opposite side of the table, and moved the candles, so as to obtain a clear and uninterrupted view of her servant's face.

"Have you noticed a respectable elderly woman," she began abruptly, "who has been here once or twice, in the last fortnight, to pay me a visit?"

"Yes, ma'am: I think I let her in, the second time she came. An elderly person, named Mrs. Attwood?"

"That is the person I mean. Mrs. Attwood is Mr. Loscombe's housekeeper; not the housekeeper at his private residence, but the housekeeper at his offices in Lincoln's Inn. I promised to go and drink tea with

her, some evening this week—and I have been to-night. It is strange of me, is it not, to be on these familiar terms with a woman in Mrs. Attwood's situation?"

Louisa made no answer in words. Her face spoke for her: she could hardly avoid thinking it strange.

"I had a motive for making friends with Mrs. Attwood," Magdalen went on. "She is a widow, with a large family of daughters. Her daughters are all in service. One of them is an under-housemaid, in the service of Admiral Bartram, at St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. I found that out from Mrs. Attwood's master: and as soon as I arrived at the discovery, I privately determined to make Mrs. Attwood's acquaintance. Stranger still, is it not?"

Louisa began to look a little uneasy. Her mistress's manner was at variance with her mistress's words—it was plainly suggestive of something startling to come.

"What attraction Mrs. Attwood finds in my society," Magdalen continued, "I cannot presume to say. I can only tell you, she has seen better days; she is an educated person; and she may like my society on that account. At any rate, she has readily met my advances towards her. What attraction I find in this good woman, on my side, is soon told. I have a great curiosity—an unaccountable curiosity, you will think—about the present course of household affairs at St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. Mrs. Attwood's daughter is a good girl, and constantly writes to her mother. Her

mother is proud of the letters and proud of the girl, and is ready enough to talk about her daughter, and her daughter's place. That is Mrs. Attwood's attraction to *me*. You understand, so far?"

Yes—Louisa understood. Magdalen went on.

"Thanks to Mrs. Attwood, and Mrs. Attwood's daughter," she said, "I know some curious particulars already of the household at St. Crux. Servants' tongues and servants' letters—as I need not tell *you*—are oftener occupied with their masters and mistresses, than their masters and mistresses suppose. The only mistress at St. Crux is the housekeeper. But there is a master—Admiral Bartram. He appears to be a strange old man, whose whims and fancies amuse his servants as well as his friends. One of his fancies (the only one we need trouble ourselves to notice) is, that he had men enough about him, when he was living at sea, and that now he is living on shore, he will be waited on by women-servants alone. The one man in the house, is an old sailor, who has been all his life with his master—he is a kind of pensioner at St. Crux, and has little or nothing to do with the house-work. The other servants, in-doors, are all women; and instead of a footman to wait on him at dinner, the admiral has a parlour-maid. The parlour-maid now at St. Crux, is engaged to be married; and, as soon as her master can suit himself, she is going away. These discoveries I made some days since. But when I saw Mrs. Attwood to night, she had received another letter from her daughter, in the interval; and that letter has

helped me to find out something more. The housekeeper is at her wits' end to find a new servant. Her master insists on youth and good looks—he leaves everything else to the housekeeper—but he will have that. All the inquiries made in the neighbourhood, have failed to produce the sort of parlour-maid whom the admiral wants. If nothing can be done in the next fortnight or three weeks, the housekeeper will advertise in the Times; and will come to London herself to see the applicants, and to make strict personal inquiry into their characters."

Louisa looked at her mistress, more attentively than ever. The expression of perplexity left her face, and a shade of disappointment appeared there in its stead.

"Bear in mind what I have said," pursued Magdalen; "and wait a minute more, while I ask you some questions. Don't think you understand me yet—I can assure you, you don't understand me. Have you always lived in service as lady's maid?"

"No, ma'am."

"Have you ever lived as parlour-maid?"

"Only in one place, ma'am—and not for long there."

"I suppose you lived long enough to learn your duties?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What were your duties, besides waiting at table?"

"I had to show visitors in."

"Yes—and what else?"

"I had the plate, and the glass to look after—and

the table-linen was all under my care. I had to answer all the bells, except in the bedrooms. There were other little odds and ends sometimes to do——”

“But your regular duties were the duties you have just mentioned?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How long ago is it, since you lived in service as parlour-maid?”

“A little better than two years, ma’am.”

“I suppose you have not forgotten how to wait at table, and clean plate, and the rest of it, in that time?”

At this question, Louisa’s attention, which had been wandering more and more during the progress of Magdalen’s inquiries, wandered away altogether. Her gathering anxieties got the better of her discretion, and even of her timidity. Instead of answering her mistress, she suddenly and confusedly ventured on a question of her own.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am,” she said. “Did you mean me to offer for the parlour-maid’s place at St. Crux?”

“You?” replied Magdalen. “Certainly not! Have you forgotten what I said to you in this room, before I went out? I mean you to be married, and to go to Australia with your husband and your child. You have not waited as I told you, to hear me explain myself. You have drawn your own conclusions; and you have drawn them wrong. I asked a question just now, which you have not answered—I asked if you had forgotten your parlour-maid’s duties?”

“Oh no, ma’am!” Louisa had replied rather unwillingly, thus far. She answered readily and confidently, now.

“Could you teach the duties to another servant?” asked Magdalen.

“Yes, ma’am—easily, if she was quick and attentive.”

“Could you teach the duties to Me?”

Louisa started and changed colour. “You, ma’am!” she exclaimed, half in incredulity, half in alarm.

“Yes,” said Magdalen. “Could you qualify *me* to take the parlour-maid’s place at St. Crux?”

Plain as those words were, the bewilderment which they produced in Louisa’s mind, seemed to render her incapable of comprehending her mistress’s proposal. “You, ma’am!” she repeated, vacantly.

“I shall perhaps help you to understand this extraordinary project of mine,” said Magdalen, “if I tell you plainly what the object of it is. Do you remember what I said to you about Mr. Vanstone’s will, when you came here from Scotland to join me?”

“Yes, ma’am. You told me you had been left out of the will altogether. I’m sure my fellow-servant would never have been one of the witnesses, if she had known——”

“Never mind that now. I don’t blame your fellow-servant—I blame nobody but Mrs. Lccount. Let me go on with what I was saying. It is not at all certain that Mrs. Lccount can do me the mischief which Mrs. Lccount intended. There is a chance that my lawyer, Mr. Loscombe, may be able to gain me what is fairly

my due, in spite of the will. The chance turns on my discovering a letter, which Mr. Loscombe believes, and which I believe, to be kept privately in Admiral Bartram's possession. I have not the least hope of getting at that letter, if I make the attempt in my own person. Mrs. Lecount has poisoned the admiral's mind against me, and Mr. Vanstone has given him a secret to keep from me. If I wrote to him, he would not answer my letter. If I went to his house, the door would be closed in my face. I must find my way into St. Crux as a stranger—I must be in a position to look about the house, unsuspected—I must be there with plenty of time on my hands. All the circumstances are in my favour, if I am received into the house as a servant; and as a servant I mean to go."

"But you are a lady, ma'am," objected Louisa, in the greatest perplexity. "The servants at St. Crux would find you out."

"I am not at all afraid of their finding me out," said Magdalen. "I know how to disguise myself in other people's characters more cleverly than you suppose. Leave me to face the chances of discovery—that is my risk. Let us talk of nothing now, but what concerns *you*. Don't decide yet whether you will, or will not, give me the help I want. Wait, and hear first what the help is. You are quick and clever at your needle. Can you make me the sort of gown which it is proper for a servant to wear—and can you alter one of my best silk dresses, so as to make it fit yourself—in a week's time?"

"I think I could get them done in a week, ma'am. But why am I to wear——?"

"Wait a little, and you will see. I shall give the landlady her week's notice to-morrow. In the interval, while you are making the dresses, I can be learning the parlour-maid's duties. When the house-servant here has brought up the dinner, and when you and I are alone in the room—instead of your waiting on me, as usual, I will wait on you. (I am quite serious; don't interrupt me!) Whatever I can learn besides, without hindering you, I will practise carefully at every opportunity. When the week is over, and the dresses are done, we will leave this place, and go into other lodgings—you as the mistress; and I as the maid."

"I should be found out, ma'am," interposed Louisa, trembling at the prospect before her. "I am not a lady."

"And I am," said Magdalen, bitterly. "Shall I tell you what a lady is? A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance. I shall put the gown on your back, and the sense in your head. You speak good English—you are naturally quiet, and self-restrained—if you can only conquer your timidity, I have not the least fear of you. There will be time enough, in the new lodging, for you to practise your character, and for me to practise mine. There will be time enough to make some more dresses—another gown for me, and your wedding-dress (which I mean to give you) for yourself. I shall have the newspaper sent every day. When the advertisement appears

I shall answer it—in any name I can take on the spur of the moment : in your name, if you like to lend it to me—and when the housekeeper asks me for my character I shall refer her to you. She will see you in the position of mistress, and me in the position of maid—no suspicion can possibly enter her mind, unless you put it there. If you only have the courage to follow my instructions, and to say what I shall tell you to say, the interview will be over in ten minutes.”

“You frighten me, ma’am,” said Louisa, still trembling. “You take my breath away with surprise. Courage ! Where shall I find courage ?”

“Where I keep it for you,” said Magdalen—“in the passage-money to Australia. Look at the new prospect which gives you a husband, and restores you to your child—and you will find your courage there.”

Louisa’s sad face brightened ; Louisa’s faint heart beat quick. A spark of her mistress’s spirit flew up into her eyes, as she thought of the golden future.

“If you accept my proposal,” pursued Magdalen, “you can be asked in church at once, if you like. I promise you the money, on the day when the advertisement appears in the newspaper. The risk of the housekeeper’s rejecting me, is my risk—not yours. My good looks are sadly gone off, I know. But I think I can still hold my place against the other servants—I think I can still *look* the parlour-maid whom Admiral Bartram wants. There is nothing for you to fear in this matter ; I should not have men-

tioned it if there had been. The only danger, is the danger of my being discovered at St. Crux—and that falls entirely on me. By the time I am in the admiral's house, you will be married, and the ship will be taking you to your new life."

Louisa's face, now brightening with hope, now clouding again with fear, showed plain signs of the struggle which it cost her to decide. She tried to gain time; she attempted confusedly to speak a few words of gratitude—but her mistress silenced her.

"You owe me no thanks," said Magdalen. "I tell you again, we are only helping each other. I have very little money, but it is enough for your purpose, and I give it you freely. I have led a wretched life; I have made others wretched about me. I can't even make *you* happy, except by tempting you to a new deceit. There! there! it's not your fault. Worse women than you are will help me, if you refuse. Decide as you like—but don't be afraid of taking the money. If I succeed, I shall not want it. If I fail——"

She stopped; rose abruptly from her chair; and hid her face from Louisa by walking away to the fireplace.

"If I fail," she resumed, warming her foot carelessly at the fender, "all the money in the world will be of no use to me. Never mind why—never mind Me—think of yourself. I won't take advantage of the confession you have made to me; I won't influence you against your will. Do as you yourself think best.

But remember one thing—my mind is made up : nothing you can say or do will change it.”

Her sudden removal from the table, the altered tones of her voice as she spoke the last words, appeared to renew Louisa’s hesitation. She clasped her hands together in her lap, and wrung them hard. “This has come on me very suddenly, ma’am,” said the girl. “I am sorely tempted to say, Yes. And yet, I’m almost afraid——”

“Take the night to consider it,” interposed Magdalen, keeping her face persistently turned towards the fire ; “and tell me what you have decided to do, when you come into my room to-morrow morning. I shall want no help to-night—I can undress myself. You are not so strong as I am ; you are tired, I dare say. Don’t sit up on my account. Good night, Louisa, and pleasant dreams !”

Her voice sank lower and lower, as she spoke those kind words. She sighed heavily ; and, leaning her arm on the mantelpiece, laid her head on it with a reckless weariness miserable to see. Louisa had not left the room, as she supposed—Louisa came softly to her side, and kissed her hand. Magdalen started ; but she made no attempt, this time, to draw her hand away. The sense of her own horrible isolation subdued her, at the touch of the servant’s lips. Her proud heart melted ; her eyes filled with burning tears. “Don’t distress me !” she said, faintly. “The time for kindness has gone by ; it only overpowers me now. Good-night !”

When the morning came, the affirmative answer which Magdalen had anticipated, was the answer given.

On that day, the landlady received her week's notice to quit ; and Louisa's needle flew fast through the stitches of the parlour-maid's dress.

THE END OF THE SIXTH SCENE.

BETWEEN THE SCENES.



PROGRESS OF THE STORY THROUGH THE
POST.

BETWEEN THE SCENES.

I.

FROM MISS GARTH TO MR. PENDRIL.

“ Westmoreland House,

“ Jan. 3rd, 1848.

“ DEAR MR. PENDRIL,

“ I write, as you kindly requested, to report how Norah is going on, and to tell you what changes I see for the better in the state of her mind on the subject of her sister.

“ I cannot say that she is becoming resigned to Magdalen’s continued silence—I know her faithful nature too well to say it. I can only tell you that she is beginning to find relief from the heavy pressure of sorrow and suspense, in new thoughts and new hopes. I doubt if she has yet realized this in her own mind ; but I see the result, although she is not conscious of it herself. I see her heart opening to the consolation of another interest and another love. She has not said a word to me on the subject—nor have I said a word

to her. But as certainly as I know that Mr. George Bartram's visits have lately grown more and more frequent to the family at Portland Place—so certainly I can assure you that Norah is finding a relief under her suspense, which is not of my bringing, and a hope in the future, which I have not taught her to feel.

“It is needless for me to say that I tell you this, in the strictest confidence. God knows whether the happy prospect which seems to me to be just dawning, will grow brighter or not, as times goes on. The oftener I see Mr. George Bartram—and he has called on me more than once—the stronger my liking for him grows. To my poor judgment he seems to be a gentleman, in the highest and truest sense of the word. If I could live to see Norah his wife—I should almost feel that I had lived long enough. But who can discern the future? We have suffered so much that I am afraid to hope.

“Have you heard anything of Magdalen? I don't know why or how it is—but since I have known of her husband's death, my old tenderness for her seems to cling to me more obstinately than ever.

“Always yours truly,

“HARRIET GARTH.”

II.

FROM MR. PENDRIL TO MISS GARTH.

“Serle Street, Jan. 4th, 1848.

“DEAR MISS GARTH,

“Of Mrs. Noel Vanstone herself I have heard nothing. But I have learnt, since I saw you, that the report of the position in which she is left by the death of her husband may be depended upon as the truth. No legacy of any kind is bequeathed to her. Her name is not once mentioned in her husband’s will.

“Knowing what we know, it is not to be concealed that this circumstance threatens us with more embarrassment, and perhaps with more distress. Mrs. Noel Vanstone is not the woman to submit, without a desperate resistance, to the total overthrow of all her schemes and all her hopes. The mere fact that nothing whatever has been heard of her since her husband’s death, is suggestive to my mind of serious mischief to come. In her situation, and with her temper, the quieter she is now, the more inveterately I, for one, distrust her in the future. It is impossible to say to what violent measures her present extremity may not drive her. It is impossible to feel sure, that she may not be the cause of some public scandal, this time, which may affect her innocent sister as well as herself.

“I know you will not misinterpret the motive which has led me to write these lines ; I know you will not think that I am inconsiderate enough to cause you unnecessary alarm. My sincere anxiety to see that happy

prospect realized to which your letter alludes, has caused me to write far less reservedly than I might otherwise have written. I strongly urge you to use your influence, on every occasion when you can fairly exert it, to strengthen that growing attachment, and to place it beyond the reach of any coming disasters, while you have the opportunity of doing so. When I tell you that the fortune of which Mrs. Noel Vanstone has been deprived, is entirely bequeathed to Admiral Bartram—and when I add that Mr. George Bartram is generally understood to be his uncle's heir—you will, I think, acknowledge that I am not warning you without a cause.

“Yours most truly,

“WILLIAM PENDRIL.”

III.

FROM ADMIRAL BARTRAM TO MRS. DRAKE
(HOUSEKEEPER AT ST. CRUX).

“St. Crux, Jan. 10th, 1848.

“MRS. DRAKE,

“I have received your letter from London, stating that you have found me a new parlour-maid at last, and that the girl is ready to return with you to St. Crux, when your other errands in town allow you to come back.

“This arrangement must be altered immediately, for a reason which I am heartily sorry to have to write.

“The illness of my niece, Mrs. Girdlestone—which

appeared to be so slight as to alarm none of us, doctors included—has ended fatally. I received this morning the shocking news of her death. Her husband is said to be quite frantic with grief. Mr. George has already gone to his brother-in-law's, to superintend the last melancholy duties—and I must follow him, before the funeral takes place. We propose to take Mr. Girdlestone away afterwards, and to try the effect on him of change of place and new scenes. Under these sad circumstances, I may be absent from St. Crux a month or six weeks at least—the house will be shut up—and the new servant will not be wanted until my return.

“You will therefore tell the girl, on receiving this letter, that a death in the family has caused a temporary change in our arrangements. If she is willing to wait, you may safely engage her to come here in six weeks’ time—I shall be back then, if Mr. George is not. If she refuses, pay her what compensation is right, and so have done with her.

“Yours,

“ARTHUR BARTRAM.”

IV.

FROM MRS. DRAKE TO ADMIRAL BARTRAM.

“Jan. 11th.

“HONOURED SIR,

“I hope to get my errands done, and to return to St. Crux to-morrow—but write to save you anxiety, in case of delay.

“The young woman whom I have engaged (Louisa by name) is willing to wait your time ; and her present mistress, taking an interest in her welfare, will provide for her during the interval. She understands that she is to enter on her new service in six weeks from the present date—namely, on the twenty-fifth of February next.

“Begging you will accept my respectful sympathy under the sad bereavement which has befallen the family,

“I remain, Honoured Sir, your humble servant,

“SOPHIA DRAKE.”

THE SEVENTH SCENE.



ST. CRUX-IN-THE-MARSH.

THE SEVENTH SCENE.

CHAPTER I.

“THIS is where you are to sleep. Put yourself tidy ; and then come down again to my room. The admiral has returned, and you will have to begin by waiting on him at dinner to-day.”

With those words Mrs. Drake, the housekeeper, closed the door ; and the new parlour-maid was left alone in her bed-chamber at St. Crux.

That day was the eventful twenty-fifth of February. In barely four months from the time when Mrs. Lecount had placed her master's private Instructions in his Executor's hands, the one combination of circumstances against which it had been her first and foremost object to provide, was exactly the combination which had now taken place. Mr. Noel Vanstone's widow, and Admiral Bartram's Secret Trust were together in the same house.

Thus far, events had declared themselves, without an exception, in Magdalen's favour. Thus far, the path

which had led her to St. Crux, had been a path without an obstacle. Louisa—whose name she had now taken—had sailed three days since for Australia with her husband and her child: she was the only living creature whom Magdalen had trusted with her secret, and she was by this time out of sight of the English land. The girl had been careful, reliable, and faithfully devoted to her mistress's interests to the last. She had passed the ordeal of her interview with the housekeeper, and had forgotten none of the instructions by which she had been prepared to meet it. She had herself proposed to turn the six weeks' delay, caused by the death in the admiral's family, to good account, by continuing the all-important practice of those domestic lessons, on the perfect acquirement of which her mistress's daring stratagem depended for its success. Thanks to the time thus gained, when Louisa's marriage was over, and the day of parting had come, Magdalen had learnt and mastered, in the nicest detail, everything that her former servant could teach her. On the day when she passed the doors of St. Crux, she entered on her desperate venture, strong in the ready presence of mind under emergencies which her later life had taught her—stronger still, in the trained capacity that she possessed for the assumption of a character not her own—strongest of all, in her two months' daily familiarity with the practical duties of the position which she had undertaken to fill.

As soon as Mrs. Drake's departure had left her alone,

she unpacked her box, and dressed herself for the evening.

She put on a lavender-coloured stuff gown—half mourning for Mrs. Girdlestone; ordered for all the servants, under the admiral's instructions—a white muslin apron, and a neat white cap and collar, with ribbons to match the gown. In this servant's costume—in the plain gown fastening high round her neck, in the neat little white cap at the back of her head—in this simple dress, to the eyes of all men, not linen-draper, at once the most modest and the most alluring that a woman can wear, the sad changes which mental suffering had wrought in her beauty almost disappeared from view. In the evening costume of a lady; with her bosom uncovered, with her figure armed, rather than dressed, in unpliable silk—the admiral might have passed her by without notice in his own drawing-room. In the evening costume of a servant, no admirer of beauty could have looked at her once, and not have turned again to look at her for the second time.

Descending the stairs, on her way to the house-keeper's room, she passed by the entrances to two long stone corridors, with rows of doors opening on them; one corridor situated on the second, and one on the first floor of the house. "Many rooms!" she thought, as she looked at the doors. "Weary work, searching here for what I have come to find!"

On reaching the ground floor she was met by a weather-beaten old man, who stopped and stared at her with an appearance of great interest. He was the same

old man whom Captain Wragge had seen, in the back-yard at St. Crux, at work on the model of a ship. All round the neighbourhood he was known, far and wide, as "the admiral's coxswain." His name was Mazey. Sixty years had written their story of hard work at sea, and hard drinking on shore, on the veteran's grim and wrinkled face. Sixty years had proved his fidelity, and had brought his battered old carcass, at the end of the voyage, into port in his master's house.

Seeing no one else of whom she could inquire, Magdalen requested the old man to show her the way that led to the housekeeper's room.

"I'll show you, my dear," said old Mazey, speaking in the high and hollow voice peculiar to the deaf. "You're the new maid—eh? And a fine-grown girl, too! His honour, the admiral, likes a parlour-maid with a clean run fore and aft. You'll do, my dear—you'll do."

"You must not mind what Mr. Mazey says to you," remarked the housekeeper, opening her door as the old sailor expressed his approval of Magdalen in these terms. "He is privileged to talk as he pleases; and he is very tiresome and slovenly in his habits—but he means no harm."

With that apology for the veteran, Mrs. Drake led Magdalen first to the pantry, and next to the linen-room; installing her, with all due formality, in her own domestic dominions. This ceremony completed, the new parlour-maid was taken up-stairs, and was shown the dining-room, which opened out of the corridor on the

first floor. Here, she was directed to lay the cloth, and to prepare the table for one person only—Mr. George Bartram not having returned with his uncle to St. Crux. Mrs. Drake's sharp eyes watched Magdalen attentively, as she performed this introductory duty; and Mrs. Drake's private convictions, when the table was spread, forced her to acknowledge, so far, that the new servant thoroughly understood her work.

An hour later, the soup-tureen was placed on the table; and Magdalen stood alone behind the admiral's empty chair, waiting her master's first inspection of her, when he entered the dining-room.

A large bell rang in the lower regions—quick, shambling footsteps pattered on the stone corridor outside—the door opened suddenly—and a tall lean yellow old man, sharp as to his eyes, shrewd as to his lips, fussily restless as to all his movements, entered the room, with two huge Labrador dogs at his heels, and took his seat in a violent hurry. The dogs followed him, and placed themselves, with the utmost gravity and composure, one on each side of his chair. This was Admiral Bartram—and these were the companions of his solitary meal.

“Ay! ay! ay! here's the new parlour-maid to be sure!” he began, looking sharply, but not at all unkindly, at Magdalen. “What's your name, my good girl? Louisa, is it? I shall call you Lucy, if you don't mind. Take off the cover, my dear—I'm a minute or two late to-day. Don't be unpunctual to-morrow on that account; I am as regular as clock-

work generally. How are you after your journey? Did my spring-cart bump you about much in bringing you from the station? Capital soup this—hot as fire—reminds me of the soup we used to have in the West Indies in the year Three. Have you got your half-mourning on? Stand there, and let me see. Ah, yes, very neat, and nice, and tidy. Poor Mrs. Girdlestone! Oh, dear, dear, dear, poor Mrs. Girdlestone! You're not afraid of dogs are you, Lucy? Eh? What? You like dogs? That's right! Always be kind to dumb animals. These two dogs dine with me every day, except when there's company. The dog with the black nose is Brutus; and the dog with the white nose is Cassius. Did you ever hear who Brutus and Cassius were? Ancient Romans? That's right—good girl. Mind your book and your needle; and we'll get you a good husband one of these days. Take away the soup, my dear, take away the soup!"

This was the man whose secret it was now the one interest of Magdalen's life to surprise! This was the man whose name had supplanted hers in Noel Vanstone's will!

The fish and the roast meat followed; and the admiral's talk rambled on—now in soliloquy, now addressed to the parlour-maid, and now directed to the dogs—as familiarly and as disconnectedly as ever. Magdalen observed with some surprise, that the companions of the admiral's dinner had, thus far, received no scraps from their master's plate. The two magnificent brutes sat squatted on their haunches,

with their great heads over the table, watching the progress of the meal with the profoundest attention, but apparently expecting no share in it. The roast meat was removed, the admiral's plate was changed, and Magdalen took the silver covers off the two made-dishes on either side of the table. As she handed the first of the savoury dishes to her master, the dogs suddenly exhibited a breathless personal interest in the proceedings. Brutus gluttonously watered at the mouth; and the tongue of Cassius, protruding in unutterable expectation, smoked again between his enormous jaws.

The admiral helped himself liberally from the dish; sent Magdalen to the side-table to get him some bread; and, when he thought her eye was off him, furtively tumbled the whole contents of his plate into Brutus's mouth. Cassius whined faintly as his fortunate comrade swallowed the savoury mess at a gulp. "Hush! you fool," whispered the admiral. "Your turn next!"

Magdalen presented the second dish. Once more, the old gentleman helped himself largely—once more, he sent her away to the side-table—once more, he tumbled the entire contents of the plate down the dog's throat; selecting Cassius, this time, as became a considerate master and an impartial man. When the next course followed—consisting of a plain pudding and an unwholesome "cream"—Magdalen's suspicion of the function of the dogs at the dinner-table was confirmed. While the master took the simple pudding,

the dogs swallowed the elaborate cream. The admiral was plainly afraid of offending his cook on the one hand, and of offending his digestion on the other—and Brutus and Cassius were the two trained accomplices who regularly helped him every day off the horns of his dilemma. "Very good ! very good !" said the old gentleman, with the most transparent duplicity. "Tell the cook, my dear, a capital cream !"

Having placed the wine and dessert on the table, Magdalen was about to withdraw. Before she could leave the room, her master called her back.

"Stop, stop !" said the admiral. "You don't know the ways of the house yet, Lucy. Put another wine-glass here, at my right hand—the largest you can find, my dear. I've got a third dog, who comes in at dessert—a drunken old sea-dog who has followed my fortunes afloat and ashore, for fifty years, and more. Yes, yes ; that's the sort of glass we want. You're a good girl—you're a neat, handy girl. Steady, my dear ! there's nothing to be frightened at !"

A sudden thump on the outside of the door, followed by one mighty bark from each of the dogs, had made Magdalen start. "Come in !" shouted the admiral. The door opened ; the tails of Brutus and Cassius cheerfully thumped the floor ; and old Mazey marched straight up to the right-hand side of his master's chair. The veteran stood there, with his legs wide apart and his balance carefully adjusted, as if the dining-room had been a cabin, and the house a ship, pitching in a sea-way.

The admiral filled the large glass with port, filled his own glass with claret, and raised it to his lips.

“God bless the Queen, Mazey,” said the admiral.

“God bless the Queen, your honour,” said old Mazey, swallowing his port, as the dogs swallowed the made-dishes, at a gulp.

“How’s the wind, Mazey?”

“West and by Noathe, your honour.”

“Any report to-night, Mazey?”

“No report, your honour.”

“Good evening, Mazey.”

“Good evening, your honour.”

The after-dinner ceremony thus completed, old Mazey made his bow, and walked out of the room again. Brutus and Cassius stretched themselves on the rug to digest mushrooms and made gravies in the lubricating heat of the fire. “For what we have received, the Lord make us truly thankful,” said the admiral. “Go down stairs, my good girl, and get your supper. A light meal, Lucy, if you take my advice—a light meal or you will have the nightmare. Early to bed, my dear, and early to rise, makes a parlour-maid healthy and wealthy and wise. That’s the wisdom of your ancestors—you mustn’t laugh at it. Good night.” In those words Magdalen was dismissed; and so her first day’s experience of Admiral Bartram came to an end.

After breakfast, the next morning, the admiral’s directions to the new parlour-maid, included among

them one particular order which, in Magdalen's situation, it was especially her interest to receive. In the old gentleman's absence from home that day, on local business which took him to Ossory, she was directed to make herself acquainted with the whole inhabited quarter of the house, and to learn the positions of the various rooms, so as to know where the bells called her when the bells rang. Mrs. Drake was charged with the duty of superintending the voyage of domestic discovery, unless she happened to be otherwise engaged—in which case, any one of the inferior servants would be equally competent to act as Magdalen's guide.

At noon the admiral left for Ossory, and Magdalen presented herself in Mrs. Drake's room, to be shown over the house. Mrs. Drake happened to be otherwise engaged; and referred her to the head housemaid. The head housemaid happened on that particular morning to be in the same condition as Mrs. Drake; and referred her to the under-housemaids. The under-housemaids declared they were all behindhand and had not a minute to spare—they suggested, not too civilly, that old Mazey had nothing on earth to do, and that he knew the house as well, or better than he knew his A B C. Magdalen took the hint, with a secret indignation and contempt which it cost her a hard struggle to conceal. She had suspected, on the previous night, and she was certain now, that the women-servants all incomprehensibly resented her presence among them, with the same sullen unanimity of distrust. Mrs. Drake, as she had seen for herself,

was really engaged that morning over her accounts. But of all the servants under her who had made their excuses, not one had even affected to be more occupied than usual. Their looks said plainly, "We don't like you; and we won't show you over the house."

She found her way to old Mazey, not by the scanty directions given her, but by the sound of the veteran's cracked and quavering voice, singing in some distant seclusion, a verse of the immortal sea-song—"Tom Bowling." Just as she stopped among the rambling stone passages on the basement story of the house, uncertain which way to turn next, she heard the tuneless old voice in the distance, singing these lines:

"His form was of the manliest beau-u-u-uty,
His heart was ki-i-ind and soft;
Faithful below Tom did his duty,
But now he's gone alo-o-o-o-oft—
But now he's go-o-o-o-one aloft!"

Magdalen followed in the direction of the quavering voice, and found herself in a little room, looking out on the back yard. There sat old Mazey, with his spectacles low on his nose, and his knotty old hands blundering over the rigging of his model ship. There were Brutus and Cassius digesting before the fire again, and snoring as if they thoroughly enjoyed it. There was Lord Nelson on one wall, in flaming water-colours; and there on the other was a portrait of Admiral Bartram's last flag-ship, in full sail on a sea of

slate, with a salmon-coloured sky to complete the illusion.

“What, they won’t show you over the house—won’t they?” said old Mazey. “I will, then! That head housemaid’s a sour one, my dear—if ever there was a sour one yet. You’re too young and good-looking to please ’em—that’s what you are.” He rose, took off his spectacles, and feebly mended the fire. “She’s as straight as a poplar,” said old Mazey, considering Magdalen’s figure in drowsy soliloquy. “I say she’s as straight as a poplar; and his honour the admiral says so too! Come along, my dear,” he proceeded, addressing himself to Magdalen again. “I’ll teach you your Pints of the Compass first. ; When you know your Pints, blow high, blow low, you’ll find it plain sailing all over the house.”

He led the way to the door—stopped, and suddenly bethinking himself of his miniature ship, went back to put his model away in an empty cupboard—led the way to the door again—stopped once more—remembered that some of the rooms were chilly—and pottered about, swearing and grumbling, and looking for his hat. Magdalen sat down patiently to wait for him. She gratefully contrasted his treatment of her with the treatment she had received from the women. Resist it as firmly, despise it as proudly as we may, all studied unkindness—no matter how contemptible it may be—has a stinging power in it which reaches to the quick. Magdalen only knew how she had felt the small malice of the female servants, by the effect which the rough

kindness of the old sailor produced on her afterwards. The dumb welcome of the dogs, when the movements in the room had roused them from their sleep, touched her more acutely still. Brutus pushed his mighty muzzle companionably into her hand; and Cassius laid his friendly fore-paw on her lap. Her heart yearned over the two creatures as she patted and caressed them. It seemed only yesterday since she and the dogs at Combe-Raven had roamed the garden together, and had idled away the summer mornings luxuriously on the shady lawn.

Old Mazey found his hat at last; and they started on their exploring expedition, with the dogs after them.

Leaving the basement story of the house, which was entirely devoted to the servants' offices, they ascended to the first floor, and entered the long corridor, with which Magdalen's last night's experience had already made her acquainted. "Put your back agin this wall," said old Mazey, pointing to the long wall—pierced at irregular intervals with windows looking out over a court-yard and fish-pond—which formed the right-hand side of the corridor, as Magdalen now stood. "Put your back here," said the veteran; "and look straight afore you. What do you see?"—"The opposite wall of the passage," said Magdalen.—"Ay! ay! what else?"—"The doors leading into the rooms."—"What else?"—"I see nothing else." Old Mazey chuckled, winked, and shook his knotty forefinger at Magdalen impressively. "You see one of the Pints of the Com-

pass, my dear. When you've got your back agin this wall, and when you look straight afore you—you look Noathe. If you ever get lost hereaway, put your back agin the wall, look out straight afore you, and say to yourself, 'I look Noathe!' You do that like a good girl, and you won't lose your bearings."

After administering this preliminary dose of instruction, old Mazey opened the first of the doors on the left-hand side of the passage. It led into the dining-room, with which Magdalen was already familiar. The second room was fitted up as a library; and the third, as a morning-room. The fourth and fifth doors—both belonging to dismantled and uninhabited rooms, and both locked—brought them to the end of the North wing of the house, and to the opening of a second and shorter passage, placed at a right angle to the first. Here old Mazey, who had divided his time pretty equally, during the investigation of the rooms in talking of "his honour the Admiral," and whistling to the dogs—returned with all possible expedition to the points of the compass; and gravely directed Magdalen to repeat the ceremony of putting her back against the wall. She attempted to shorten the proceedings, by declaring (quite correctly) that in her present position she knew she was looking East. "Don't you talk about the East, my dear," said old Mazey, proceeding unmoved with his own system of instruction, "till you know the East first. Put your back agin this wall, and look straight afore you. What do you see?" The remainder of the catechism

proceeded as before. When the end was reached, Magdalen's instructor was satisfied. He chuckled and winked at her once more. "Now you may talk about the East, my dear," said the veteran, "for now you know it."

The East passage, after leading them on for a few yards only, terminated in a vestibule, with a high door in it which faced them as they advanced. The door admitted them to a large and lofty drawing-room, decorated like all the other apartments, with valuable old-fashioned furniture. Leading the way across this room, Magdalen's conductor pushed back a heavy sliding door, opposite the door of entrance. "Put your apron over your head," said old Mazey. "We are coming to the Banketing Hall, now. The floor's mortal cold, and the damp sticks to the place like cockroaches to a collier. His honour the admiral calls it the Arctic Passage. I've got my name for it, too. I call it, Freeze-your-Bones."

Magdalen passed through the doorway, and found herself in the ancient Banqueting-Hall of St. Crux.

On her left hand, she saw a row of lofty windows, set deep in embrasures, and extending over a frontage of more than a hundred feet in length. On her right hand, ranged in one long row from end to end of the opposite wall, hung a dismal collection of black begrimed old pictures, rotting from their frames, and representing battle-scenes by sea and land. Below the pictures, midway down the length of the wall, yawned a huge cavern of a fireplace, surmounted by a towering

mantelpiece of black marble. The one object of furniture (if furniture it might be called) visible far or near in the vast emptiness of the place, was a gaunt ancient tripod of curiously chased metal, standing lonely in the middle of the hall, and supporting a wide circular pan, filled deep with ashes from an extinct charcoal fire. The high ceiling, once finely carved and gilt, was foul with dirt and cobwebs; the naked walls at either end of the room were stained with damp; and the cold of the marble floor struck through the narrow strip of matting laid down, parallel with the windows, as a footpath for passengers across the wilderness of the room. No better name for it could have been devised than the name which old Mazey had found. "Freeze-your-Bones" accurately described, in three words, the Banqueting Hall at St. Crux.

"Do you never light a fire in this dismal place?" asked Magdalen.

"It all depends on which side of Freeze-your-Bones his honour the admiral lives," said old Mazey. "His honour likes to shift his quarters, sometimes to one side of the house, sometimes to the other. If he lives Noathe of Freeze-your-Bones—which is where you've just come from—we don't waste our coals here. If he lives South of Freeze-your-Bones—which is where we are going to next—we light the fire in the grate and the charcoal in the pan. Every night, when we do that, the damp gets the better of us: every morning, we turn to again, and get the better of the damp."

With this remarkable explanation, old Mazey led

the way to the lower end of the Hall, opened more doors, and showed Magdalen through another suite of rooms, four in number; all of moderate size, and all furnished in much the same manner as the rooms in the northern wing. She looked out of the windows, and saw the neglected gardens of St. Crux, overgrown with brambles and weeds. Here and there, at no great distance in the grounds, the smoothly curving line of one of the tidal streams peculiar to the locality, wound its way, gleaming in the sunlight, through gaps in the brambles and trees. The more distant view ranged over the flat eastward country beyond, speckled with its scattered little villages; crossed and re-crossed by its network of "backwaters;" and terminated abruptly by the long straight line of sea-wall which protects the defenceless coast of Essex from invasion by the sea.

"Have we more rooms still to see?" asked Magdalen, turning from the view of the garden, and looking about her for another door.

"No more, my dear—we've run aground here, and we may as well wear round and put back again," said old Mazey. "There's another side to the house—due south of you as you stand now—which is all tumbling about our ears. You must go out into the garden, if you want to see it; it's built off from us by a brick bulkhead, t'other side of this wall here. The monks lived due south of us, my dear, hundreds of years afore his honour the admiral was born or thought of; and a fine time of it they had, as I've heard. They sang in the church all the morning, and drank grog in the or-

chard all the afternoon. They slept off their grog on the best of feather-beds; and they fattened on the neighbourhood all the year round. Lucky beggars! lucky beggars!"

Apostrophizing the monks in these terms, and evidently regretting that he had not lived himself in those good old times, the veteran led the way back through the rooms. On the return passage across "Freeze-your-Bones," Magdalen preceded him. "She's as straight as a poplar," mumbled old Mazey to himself, hobbling along after his youthful companion, and wagging his venerable head in cordial approval. "I never was particular what nation they belonged to—but I always *did* like 'em straight and fine-grown, and I always *shall* like 'em straight and fine-grown, to my dying day."

"Are there more rooms to see up-stairs, on the second floor?" asked Magdalen, when they had returned to the point from which they had started.

The naturally clear distinct tones of her voice, had hitherto reached the old sailor's imperfect sense of hearing easily enough. Rather to her surprise, he became stone-deaf, on a sudden, to her last question.

"Are you sure of your Pints of the Compass?" he inquired. "If you're not sure, put your back agin' the wall, and we'll go all over 'em again, my dear, beginning with the Noathe."

Magdalen assured him that she felt quite familiar, by this time, with all the points, the "Noathe" included—and then repeated her question in louder tones. The

veteran obstinately matched her, by becoming deafer than ever.

“Yes, my dear,” he said; “you’re right; it *is* chilly in these passages; and unless I go back to my fire, my fire ’ll go out—won’t it? If you don’t feel sure of your Pints of the Compass, come in to me, and I’ll put you right again.” He winked benevolently, whistled to the dogs, and hobbled off. Magdalen heard him chuckle over his own success in balking her curiosity on the subject of the second floor. “I know how to deal with ’em!” said old Mazey to himself, in high triumph. “Tall and short, native and foreign, sweethearts and wives—I know how to deal with ’em!”

Left by herself, Magdalen exemplified the excellence of the old sailor’s method of treatment, in her particular case, by ascending the stairs immediately, to make her own observations on the second floor. The stone passage here was exactly similar—except that more doors opened out of it—to the passage on the first floor. She opened the two nearest doors, one after another, at a venture, and discovered that both rooms were bed-chambers. The fear of being discovered by one of the women-servants, in a part of the house with which she had no concern, warned her not to push her investigations on the bedroom floor, too far at starting. She hurriedly walked down the passage to see where it ended; discovered that it came to its termination in a lumber-room, answering to the position of the vestibule down stairs; and retraced her steps immediately.

On her way back, she noticed an object which had

previously escaped her attention. It was a low truckle bed, placed parallel with the wall, and close to one of the doors, on the bedroom side. In spite of its strange and comfortless situation, the bed was apparently occupied at night, by a sleeper: the sheets were on it, and the end of a thick red fisherman's cap, peeped out from under the pillow. She ventured on opening the door near which the bed was placed; and found herself, as she conjectured from certain signs and tokens, in the admiral's sleeping chamber. A moment's observation of the room was all she dared risk; and, softly closing the door again, she returned to the kitchen regions.

The truckle bed, and the strange position in which it was placed, dwelt on her mind all through the afternoon. Who could possibly sleep in it? The remembrance of the red fisherman's cap, and the knowledge she had already gained of Mazey's dog-like fidelity to his master, helped her to guess that the old sailor might be the occupant of the truckle bed. But why, with bedrooms enough and to spare, should he occupy that cold and comfortless situation at night? Why should he sleep on guard outside his master's door? Was there some nocturnal danger in the house, of which the admiral was afraid? The question seemed absurd—and yet the position of the bed forced it irresistibly on her mind.

Stimulated by her own ungovernable curiosity on this subject, Magdalen ventured to question the house-keeper. She acknowledged having walked from end

to end of the passage on the second floor, to see if it was as long as the passage on the first; and she mentioned having noticed with astonishment the position of the truckle bed. Mrs. Drake answered her implied inquiry shortly and sharply. "I don't blame a young girl like you," said the old lady, "for being a little curious, when she first comes into such a strange house as this. But remember, for the future, that your business does not lie on the bedroom story. Mr. Mazey sleeps on that bed you noticed. It is his habit at night, to sleep outside his master's door." With that meagre explanation Mrs. Drake's lips closed, and opened no more.

Later in the day, Magdalen found an opportunity of applying to old Mazey himself. She discovered the veteran in high good humour, smoking his pipe, and warming a tin mug of ale at his own snug fire.

"Mr. Mazey," she asked boldly, "why do you put your bed in that cold passage?"

"What! you have been up-stairs, you young jade, have you?" said old Mazey, looking up from his mug with a leer.

Magdalen smiled and nodded. "Come! come! tell me," she said coaxingly. "Why do you sleep outside the admiral's door?"

"Why do you part your hair in the middle, my dear?" asked old Mazey, with another leer.

"I suppose, because I am accustomed to do it," answered Magdalen.

"Ay! ay!" said the veteran. "That's why, is it?"

Well, my dear, the reason why you part your hair in the middle, is the reason why I sleep outside the admiral's door. I know how to deal with 'em!" chuckled old Mazey, lapsing into soliloquy, and stirring up his ale in high triumph. "Tall and short, native and foreign, sweethearts and wives—I know how to deal with 'em!"

Magdalen's third, and last, attempt at solving the mystery of the truckle bed, was made while she was waiting on the admiral at dinner. The old gentleman's questions gave her an opportunity of referring to the subject, without any appearance of presumption or disrespect—but he proved to be quite as impenetrable, in his way, as old Mazey and Mrs. Drake had been in theirs. "It doesn't concern you, my dear," said the admiral, bluntly. "Don't be curious. Look in your Old Testament when you go down stairs, and see what happened in the Garden of Eden through curiosity. Be a good girl—and don't imitate your mother Eve."

Late at night, as Magdalen passed the end of the second-floor passage, proceeding alone on her way up to her own room, she stopped and listened. A screen was placed at the entrance of the corridor, so as to hide it from the view of persons passing on the stairs. The snoring she heard on the other side of the screen, encouraged her to slip round it, and to advance a few steps. Shading the light of her candle with her hand, she ventured close to the admiral's door, and saw to her surprise that the bed had been moved, since she

had seen it in the daytime, so as to stand exactly across the door, and to bar the way entirely to any one who might attempt to enter the admiral's room. After this discovery, old Mazey himself, snoring lustily, with the red fisherman's cap pulled down to his eyebrows, and the blankets drawn up to his nose—became an object of secondary importance only, by comparison with his bed. That the veteran did actually sleep on guard before his master's door—and that he and the admiral and the housekeeper were in the secret of this unaccountable proceeding—was now beyond all doubt.

“A strange end,” thought Magdalen, pondering over her discovery as she stole up-stairs to her own sleeping-room—“a strange end to a strange day!”

CHAPTER II.

THE first week passed, the second week passed, and Magdalen was, to all appearance, no nearer to the discovery of the Secret Trust, than on the day when she first entered on her service at St. Crux.

But the fortnight, uneventful though it was, had not been a fortnight lost. Experience had already satisfied her on one important point—experience had shown that she could set the rooted distrust of the other servants safely at defiance. Time had accustomed the women to her presence in the house, without shaking the vague conviction which possessed them all alike, that the new comer was not one of themselves. All that Magdalen could do, in her own defence, was to keep the instinctive female suspicion of her, confined within those purely negative limits which it had occupied from the first—and this she accomplished.

Day after day, the women watched her, with the untiring vigilance of malice and distrust; and day after day, not the vestige of a discovery rewarded them for their pains. Silently, intelligently, and industriously—with an ever-present remembrance of herself and her place—the new parlour-maid did her work.

Her only intervals of rest and relaxation were the intervals passed occasionally, in the day, with old Mazey and the dogs, and the precious interval of the night, during which she was secure from observation in the solitude of her room. Thanks to the superfluity of bed-chambers at St. Crux, each one of the servants had the choice, if she pleased, of sleeping in a room of her own. Alone in the night, Magdalen might dare to be herself again—might dream of the past, and wake from the dream, encountering no curious eyes to notice that she was in tears—might ponder over the future, and be roused by no whispering in corners, which tainted her with the suspicion of “having something on her mind.”

Satisfied, thus far, of the perfect security of her position in the house, she profited next by a second chance in her favour, which—before the fortnight was at an end—relieved her mind of all doubt on the formidable subject of Mrs. Lecount.

Partly from the accidental gossip of the women, at the table in the servants' hall—partly from a marked paragraph in a Swiss newspaper, which she had found one morning lying open on the admiral's easy chair—she gained the welcome assurance that no danger was to be dreaded, this time, from the housekeeper's presence on the scene. Mrs. Lecount had, as it appeared, passed a week or more at St. Crux, after the date of her master's death, and had then left England, to live on the interest of her legacy, in honourable and prosperous retirement, in her native place. The paragraph

in the Swiss newspaper described the fulfilment of this laudable project. Mrs. Lecount had not only established herself at Zurich, but (wisely mindful of the uncertainty of life) had also settled the charitable uses to which her fortune was to be applied after her death. One half of it was to go to the founding of a "Lecompte Scholarship," for poor students, in the University of Geneva. The other half was to be employed by the municipal authorities of Zurich, in the maintenance and education of a certain number of orphan girls, natives of the city, who were to be trained for domestic service in later life. The Swiss journalist adverted to these philanthropic bequests in terms of extravagant eulogy. Zurich was congratulated on the possession of a Paragon of public virtue; and William Tell, in the character of benefactor to Switzerland, was compared disadvantageously with Mrs. Lecount.

The third week began; and Magdalen was now at liberty to take her first step forward on the way to the discovery of the Secret Trust.

She ascertained, from old Mazey, that it was his master's custom, during the winter and spring months, to occupy the rooms in the north wing; and during the summer and autumn, to cross the Arctic passage of "Freeze-your-Bones," and live in the eastward apartments which looked out on the garden. While the Banqueting Hall remained—owing to the admiral's inadequate pecuniary resources—in its damp and dismantled state, and while the interior of St. Crux was

thus comfortlessly divided into two separate residences, no more convenient arrangement than this could well have been devised. Now and then (as Magdalen understood from her informant) there were days, both in winter and summer, when the admiral became anxious about the condition of the rooms which he was not occupying at the time; and when he insisted on investigating the state of the furniture, the pictures, and the books with his own eyes. On these occasions—in summer as in winter—a blazing fire was kindled for some days previously, in the large grate, and the charcoal was lit in the tripod pan, to keep the Banqueting Hall as warm as circumstances would admit. As soon as the old gentleman's anxieties were set at rest, the rooms were shut up again; and "Freeze-your-Bones" was once more abandoned for weeks and weeks together to damp, desolation, and decay. The last of these temporary migrations had taken place only a few days since; the admiral had satisfied himself that the rooms in the east wing were none the worse for the absence of their master—and he might now be safely reckoned on as settled in the north wing for weeks, and perhaps, if the season was cold, for months to come.

Trifling as they might be in themselves, these particulars were of serious importance to Magdalen—for they helped her to fix the limits of the field of search. Assuming that the admiral was likely to keep all his important documents within easy reach of his own hand, she might now feel certain that the Secret Trust

was secured in one or other of the rooms in the north wing.

In which room? That question was not easy to answer.

Of the four inhabitable rooms which were all at the admiral's disposal during the day—that is to say, of the dining-room, the library, the morning-room, and the drawing-room opening out of the vestibule—the library appeared to be the apartment in which, if he had a preference, he passed the greater part of his time. There was a table in this room, with drawers that locked; there was a magnificent Italian cabinet with doors that locked; there were five cupboards under the bookcases, every one of which locked. There were receptacles similarly secured, in the other rooms; and in all or any of these, papers might be kept.

She had answered the bell, and had seen him locking and unlocking, now in one room now in another—but oftenest in the library. She had noticed occasionally that his expression was fretful and impatient, when he looked round at her from an open cabinet or cupboard, and gave his orders; and she inferred that something in connection with his papers and possessions—it might, or might not, be the Secret Trust—irritated and annoyed him from time to time. She had heard him, more than once, lock something up in one of the rooms—come out, and go into another room—wait there a few minutes—then return to the first room, with his keys in his hand—and sharply turn the locks, and turn them again. This fidgety anxiety about his keys and his cupboards might be the result of the inbred restless-

ness of his disposition, aggravated in a naturally active man, by the aimless indolence of a life in retirement—a life drifting backwards and forwards among trifles, with no regular employment to steady it at any given hour of the day. On the other hand, it was just as probable that these comings and goings, these lockings and unlockings, might be attributable to the existence of some private responsibility, which had unexpectedly intruded itself into the old man's easy existence, and which tormented him with a sense of oppression, new to the experience of his later years. Either one of these interpretations might explain his conduct as reasonably and as probably as the other. Which was the right interpretation of the two, it was, in Magdalen's position impossible to say.

The one certain discovery at which she arrived, was made in her first day's observation of him. The admiral was a rigidly careful man with his keys.

All the smaller keys he kept on a ring, in the breast-pocket of his coat. The larger, he locked up together; generally, but not always, in one of the drawers of the library table. Sometimes, he left them secured in this way at night; sometimes, he took them up to the bedroom with him in a little basket. He had no regular times for leaving them, or for taking them away with him; he had no discoverable reason for now securing them in the library-table drawer, and now again locking them up in some other place. The inveterate wilfulness and caprice of his proceedings, in these particulars, defied every effort to reduce them to a system,

and baffled all attempts at calculating on them beforehand.

The hope of gaining positive information to act on, by laying artful snares for him which he might fall into in his talk, proved, from the outset, to be utterly futile.

In Magdalen's situation, all experiments of this sort would have been in the last degree difficult and dangerous, with any man. With the admiral, they were simply impossible. His tendency to veer about from one subject to another ; his habit of keeping his tongue perpetually going, so long as there was anybody, no matter whom, within reach of the sound of his voice ; his comical want of all dignity and reserve with his servants, promised, in appearance, much ; and performed, in reality—nothing. No matter how diffidently, or how respectfully, Magdalen might presume on her master's example, and on her master's evident liking for her—the old man instantly discovered the advance she was making from her proper position, and instantly put her back in it again, with a quaint good humour which inflicted no pain, but with a blunt straightforwardness of purpose which permitted no escape. Contradictory as it may sound, Admiral Bartram was too familiar to be approached ; he kept the distance between himself and his servant more effectually than if he had been the proudest man in England. The systematic reserve of a superior towards an inferior, may be occasionally overcome—the systematic familiarity, never.

Slowly the time dragged on. The fourth week came; and Magdalen had made no new discoveries. The prospect was depressing in the last degree. Even in the apparently hopeless event of her devising a means of getting at the admiral's keys, she could not count on retaining possession of them unsuspected more than a few hours—hours which might be utterly wasted through her not knowing in what direction to begin the search. The Trust might be locked up in any one of some twenty receptacles for papers, situated in four different rooms. And which room was the likeliest to look in, which receptacle was the most promising to begin with, which position among other heaps of papers the one paper needful might be expected to occupy, was more than she could say. Hemmed in by immeasurable uncertainties on every side—condemned, as it were, to wander blindfold on the very brink of success—she waited for the chance that never came, for the event that never happened, with a patience which was sinking already into the patience of despair.

Night after night, she looked back over the vanished days—and not an event rose on her memory to distinguish them one from the other. The only interruptions to the weary uniformity of the life at St. Crux, were caused by the characteristic delinquencies of old Mazey and the dogs.

At certain intervals, the original wildness broke out in the natures of Brutus and Cassius. The modest comforts of home, the savoury charms of made-dishes, the decorous joy of digestions accomplished on hearth-

rugs, lost all their attractions; and the dogs ungratefully left the house, to seek dissipation and adventure in the outer world. On these occasions, the established after-dinner formula of question and answer between old Mazey and his master, varied a little in one particular. "God bless the Queen, Mazey," and "How's the wind, Mazey?" were followed by a new inquiry: "Where are the dogs, Mazey?" "Out on the loose, your honour, and be damned to 'em," was the veteran's unvarying answer. The admiral always sighed and shook his head gravely at the news, as if Brutus and Cassius had been sons of his own, 'who treated him with a want of proper filial respect. In two or three days' time, the dogs always returned, lean, dirty, and heartily ashamed of themselves. For the whole of the next day they were invariably tied up in disgrace. On the day after, they were scrubbed clean, and were formally readmitted to the dining-room. There, Civilization, acting through the subtle medium of the Saucepan, recovered its hold on them; and the admiral's two prodigal sons, when they saw the covers removed, watered at the mouth as copiously as ever.

Old Mazey, in his way, proved to be just as disreputably inclined on certain occasions as the dogs. At intervals, the original wildness in *his* nature broke out: he, too, lost all relish for the comforts of home, and ungratefully left the house. He usually disappeared in the afternoon, and returned at night as drunk as liquor could make him. He was by many

degrees too seasoned a vessel to meet with any disasters, on these occasions. His wicked old legs might take roundabout methods of progression, but they never failed him; his wicked old eyes might see double, but they always showed him the way home. Try as hard as they might, the servants could never succeed in persuading him that he was drunk: he always scorned the imputation. He even declined to admit the idea privately into his mind, until he had first tested his condition by an infallible criterion of his own.

It was his habit in these cases of Bacchanalian emergency, to stagger obstinately into his room on the ground floor—to take the model ship out of the cupboard—and to try if he could proceed with the never-to-be-completed employment of setting up the rigging. When he had smashed the tiny spars, and snapped asunder the delicate ropes—then, and not till then, the veteran admitted facts as they were, on the authority of practical evidence. “Ay! ay!” he used to say confidentially to himself. “The women are right. Drunk again, Mazey—drunk again!” Having reached this discovery, it was his habit to wait cunningly in the lower regions, until the admiral was safe in his room; and then to ascend in discreet list slippers, to his post. Too wary to attempt getting into the truckle-bed (which would have been only inviting the catastrophe of a fall against his master’s door), he always walked himself sober, up and down the passage. More than once, Magdalen had peeped round the

screen, and had seen the old sailor unsteadily keeping his watch, and fancying himself once more at his duty on board ship. "This is an uncommonly lively vessel in a sea-way," he used to mutter under his breath, when his legs took him down the passage in zigzag directions, or left him for the moment, studying the "Pints of the Compass," on his own system, with his back against the wall. "A nasty night, mind you," he would maunder on, taking another turn. "As dark as your pocket, and the wind heading us again from the old quarter." On the next day, old Mazey, like the dogs, was kept down stairs in disgrace. On the day after, like the dogs again, he was reinstated in his privileges; and another change was introduced in the after-dinner formula. On entering the room, the old sailor stopped short, and made his excuses, in this brief, yet comprehensive form of words, with his back against the door:—"Please your honour, I'm ashamed of myself." So the apology began and ended. "This mustn't happen again, Mazey," the admiral used to answer. "It sha'n't happen again, your honour." "Very good. Come here, and drink your glass of wine. God bless the Queen, Mazey."—The veteran tossed off his port, and the dialogue ended as usual.

So the days passed, with no incidents more important than these to relieve their monotony, until the end of the fourth week was at hand.

On the last day, an event happened; on the last day, the long-deferred promise of the future unexpect-

edly began to dawn. While Magdalen was spreading the cloth in the dining-room, as usual, Mrs. Drake looked in, and instructed her on this occasion, for the first time, to lay the table for two persons. The admiral had received a letter from his nephew. Early that evening, Mr. George Bartram was expected to return to St. Crux.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER placing the second cover, Magdalen awaited the ringing of the dinner-bell, with an interest and impatience, which she found it no easy task to conceal. The return of Mr. Bartram would, in all probability, produce a change in the life of the house—and from change of any kind, no matter how trifling, something might be hoped. The nephew might be accessible to influences which had failed to reach the uncle. In any case, the two would talk of their affairs, over their dinner; and through that talk—proceeding day after day, in her presence—the way to discovery, now absolutely invisible, might, sooner or later, show itself.

At last, the bell rang; the door opened; and the two gentlemen entered the room together.

Magdalen was struck, as her sister had been struck, by George Bartram's resemblance to her father—judging by the portrait at Combe-Raven, which presented the likeness of Andrew Vanstone in his younger days. The light hair and florid complexion, the bright blue eyes and hardy upright figure, familiar to her in the picture, were all recalled to her memory, as the

nephew followed the uncle across the room, and took his place at table. She was not prepared for this sudden revival of the lost associations of home. Her attention wandered as she tried to conceal its effect on her; and she made a blunder in waiting at table, for the first time since she had entered the house.

A quaint reprimand from the admiral, half in jest, half in earnest, gave her time to recover herself. She ventured another look at George Bartram. The impression which he produced on her, this time, roused her curiosity immediately. His face and manner plainly expressed anxiety and pre-occupation of mind. He looked oftener at his plate than at his uncle—and at Magdalen herself (except one passing inspection of the new parlour-maid, when the admiral spoke to her) he never looked at all. Some uncertainty was evidently troubling his thoughts; some oppression was weighing on his natural freedom of manner. What uncertainty? what oppression? Would any personal revelations come out, little by little, in the course of conversation at the dinner-table?

No. One set of dishes followed another set of dishes—and nothing in the shape of a personal revelation took place. The conversation halted on irregularly, between public affairs on one side and trifling private topics on the other. Politics, home and foreign, took their turn with the small household history of St. Crux: the leaders of the revolution which expelled Louis Philippe from the throne of France, marched side by side, in the dinner-table review, with old

Mazey and the dogs. The dessert was put on the table—the old sailor came in—drank his loyal toast—paid his respects to “Master George”—and went out again. Magdalen followed him, on her way back to the servants’ offices, having heard nothing in the conversation of the slightest importance to the furtherance of her own design, from the first word of it to the last. She struggled hard not to lose heart and hope on the first day. They could hardly talk again to-morrow, they could hardly talk again the next day, of the French Revolution and the dogs. Time might do wonders yet; and time was all her own.

Left together over their wine, the uncle and nephew drew their easy chairs on either side of the fire; and, in Magdalen’s absence, began the very conversation which it was Magdalen’s interest to hear.

“Claret, George?” said the admiral, pushing the bottle across the table. “You look out of spirits.”

“I am a little anxious, sir,” replied George, leaving his glass empty, and looking straight into the fire.

“I am glad to hear it,” rejoined the admiral. “I am more than a little anxious myself, I can tell you. Here we are at the last days of March—and nothing done! Your time comes to an end on the third of May; and there you sit, as if you had years still before you to turn round in.”

George smiled, and resignedly helped himself to some wine.

“Am I really to understand, sir,” he asked, “that

you are serious in what you said to me last November? Are you actually resolved to bind me to that incomprehensible condition?"

"I don't call it incomprehensible," said the admiral, irritably.

"Don't you, sir? I am to inherit your estate, unconditionally—as you have generously settled it from the first. But I am not to touch a farthing of the fortune poor Noel left you, unless I am married within a certain time. The house and lands are to be mine (thanks to your kindness), under any circumstances. But the money with which I might improve them both, is to be arbitrarily taken away from me, if I am not a married man on the third of May. I am sadly wanting in intelligence, I dare say—but a more incomprehensible proceeding I never heard of!"

"No snapping and snarling, George! Say your say out. We don't understand sneering in Her Majesty's Navy!"

"I mean no offence, sir. But I think it's a little hard to astonish me by a change of proceeding on your part, entirely foreign to my experience of your character—and then, when I naturally ask for an explanation, to turn round coolly, and leave me in the dark. If you and Noel came to some private arrangement together, before he made his will—why not tell me? Why set up a mystery between us, where no mystery need be?"

"I won't have it, George!" cried the admiral, angrily drumming on the table with the nut-crackers. "You are trying to draw me like a badger—but I won't be

drawn! I'll make any conditions I please; and I'll be accountable to nobody for them, unless I like. It's quite bad enough to have worries and responsibilities laid on my unlucky shoulders that I never bargained for—never mind what worries: they're not yours, they're mine—without being questioned and cross-questioned as if I was a witness in a box. Here's a pretty fellow!" continued the admiral, apostrophizing his nephew in red-hot irritation, and addressing himself to the dogs on the hearth-rug for want of a better audience. "Here's a pretty fellow! He is asked to help himself to two uncommonly comfortable things in their way—a fortune and a wife—he is allowed six months to get the wife in (we should have got her, in the Navy, bag and baggage, in six days)—he has a round dozen of nice girls, to my certain knowledge, in one part of the country and another, all at his disposal to choose from—and what does he do? He sits month after month, with his lazy legs crossed before him; he leaves the girls to pine on the stem; and he bothers his uncle to know the reason why! I pity the poor unfortunate women. Men were made of flesh and blood—and plenty of it, too—in my time. They're made of machinery now."

"I can only repeat, sir, I am sorry to have offended you," said George.

"Pooh! pooh! you needn't look at me in that languishing way, if you are," retorted the admiral. "Stick to your wine; and I'll forgive you. Your good health, George. I'm glad to see you again at St.

Crux. Look at that plateful of sponge-cakes ! The cook has sent them up in honour of your return. We can't hurt her feelings, and we can't spoil our wine. Here !"—The admiral tossed four sponge-cakes in quick succession down the accommodating throats of the dogs. "I am sorry, George," the old gentleman gravely proceeded ; "I am really sorry, you haven't got your eye on one of those nice girls. You don't know what a loss you're inflicting on yourself—you don't know what trouble and mortification you're causing me—by this shilly-shally conduct of yours."

"If you would only allow me to explain myself, sir, you would view my conduct in a totally different light. I am ready to marry to-morrow, if the lady will have me."

"The devil you are ! So you have got a lady in your eye, after all ? Why in Heaven's name, couldn't you tell me so before ? Never mind—I'll forgive you everything now I know you have laid your hand on a wife. Fill your glass again. Here's her health in a bumper. By-the-by, who is she ?"

"I'll tell you directly, admiral. When we began this conversation, I mentioned that I was a little anxious——"

"She's not one of my round dozen of nice girls—aha, Master George, I see that in your face, already ! Why are you anxious ?"

"I am afraid you will disapprove of my choice, sir."

"Don't beat about the bush ! How the deuce can I

say whether I disapprove or not, if you won't tell me who she is?"

"She is the eldest daughter of Andrew Vanstone of Combe-Raven."

"Who!!!"

"Miss Vanstone, sir."

The admiral put down his glass of wine untasted.

"You're right, George," he said. "I do disapprove of your choice—strongly disapprove of it."

"Is it the misfortune of her birth, sir, that you object to?"

"God forbid! the misfortune of her birth is not her fault, poor thing. You know, as well as I do, George, what I object to."

"You object to her sister?"

"Certainly! The most liberal man alive might object to her sister, I think."

"It's hard, sir, to make Miss Vanstone suffer for her sister's faults."

"*Faults*, do you call them? You have a mighty convenient memory, George, where your own interests are concerned."

"Call them crimes, if you like, sir—I say again, it's hard on Miss Vanstone. Miss Vanstone's life is pure of all reproach. From first to last, she has borne her hard lot with such patience, and sweetness, and courage, as not one woman in a thousand would have shown in her place. Ask Miss Garth, who has known her from childhood. Ask Mrs. Tyrrel, who blesses the day when she came into the house——"

“Ask a fiddlestick’s end! I beg your pardon, George—but you are enough to try the patience of a saint. My good fellow, I don’t deny Miss Vanstone’s virtues. I’ll admit, if you like, she’s the best woman that ever put on a petticoat. That is not the question——”

“Excuse me, admiral—it *is* the question, if she is to be my wife.”

“Hear me out, George; look at it from my point of view, as well as your own. What did your cousin Noel do? Your cousin Noel fell a victim, poor fellow, to one of the vilest conspiracies I ever heard of—and the prime mover of that conspiracy was Miss Vanstone’s damnable sister. She deceived him in the most infamous manner; and as soon as she was down for a handsome legacy in his will, she had the poison ready to take his life. This is the truth—we know it from Mrs. Lecount, who found the bottle locked up in her own room. If you marry Miss Vanstone, you make this wretch your sister-in-law. She becomes a member of our family. All the disgrace of what she has done; all the disgrace of what she *may* do—and the Devil who possesses her, only knows what lengths she may go to next—becomes *our* disgrace. Good Heavens, George, consider what a position that is! Consider what pitch you touch, if you make this woman your sister-in-law.”

“You have put your side of the question, admiral,” said George resolutely; “now let me put mine. A certain impression is produced on me by a young lady,

whom I meet with under very interesting circumstances. I don't act headlong on that impression, as I might have done if I had been some years younger—I wait, and put it to the trial. Every time I see this young lady, the impression strengthens; her beauty grows on me, her character grows on me; when I am away from her I am restless and dissatisfied; when I am with her I am the happiest man alive. All I hear of her conduct from those who know her best, more than confirms the high opinion I have formed of her. The one drawback I can discover, is caused by a misfortune for which she is not responsible—the misfortune of having a sister who is utterly unworthy of her. Does this discovery—an unpleasant discovery, I grant you—destroy all those good qualities in Miss Vanstone for which I love and admire her? Nothing of the sort—it only makes her good qualities all the more precious to me by contrast. If I am to have a drawback to contend with—and who expects anything else in this world?—I would infinitely rather have the drawback attached to my wife's sister, than to my wife. My wife's sister is not essential to my happiness, but my wife is. In my opinion, sir, Mrs. Noel Vanstone has done mischief enough already—I don't see the necessity of letting her do more mischief, by depriving me of a good wife. Right or wrong, that is my point of view. I don't wish to trouble you with any questions of sentiment. All I wish to say is, that I am old enough, by this time, to know my own mind—and that my mind is made up. If my marriage is essential to the execution of your intentions

on my behalf, there is only one woman in the world whom I *can* marry—and that woman is Miss Vanstone.”

There was no resisting this plain declaration. Admiral Bartram rose from his chair without making any reply, and walked perturbedly up and down the room.

The situation was emphatically a serious one. Mrs. Girdlestone's death had already produced the failure of one of the two objects contemplated by the Secret Trust. If the third of May arrived, and found George a single man, the second (and last) of the objects would then have failed in its turn. In little more than a fortnight, at the very latest, the Banns must be published in Ossory church—or the time would fail for compliance with one of the stipulations insisted on in the Trust. Obstinate as the admiral was by nature, strongly as he felt the objections which attached to his nephew's contemplated alliance, he recoiled in spite of himself, as he paced the room, and saw the facts on either side, immovably staring him in the face.

“Are you engaged to Miss Vanstone?” he asked, suddenly.

“No, sir,” replied George. “I thought it due to your uniform kindness to me, to speak to you on the subject first.”

“Much obliged, I'm sure. And you have put off speaking to me to the last moment, just as you put off everything else. Do you think Miss Vanstone will say Yes, when you ask her?”

George hesitated.

“The devil take your modesty!” shouted the admiral. “That is not a time for modesty—this is a time for speaking out. Will she or won’t she?”

“I think she will, sir.”

The admiral laughed sardonically, and took another turn in the room. He suddenly stopped; put his hands in his pockets; and stood still in a corner, deep in thought. After an interval of a few minutes, his face cleared a little; it brightened with the dawning of a new idea. He walked round briskly to George’s side of the fire, and laid his hand kindly on his nephew’s shoulder.

“You’re wrong, George,” he said—“but it is too late now to set you right. On the sixteenth of next month, the Banns must be put up in Ossory church, or you will lose the money. Have you told Miss Vanstone the position you stand in? Or have you put that off to the eleventh hour, like everything else?”

“The position is so extraordinary, sir, and it might lead to so much misapprehension of my motives, that I have felt unwilling to allude to it. I hardly know how I can tell her of it at all.”

“Try the experiment of telling her friends. Let them know it’s a question of money; and they will overcome her scruples, if you can’t. But that is not what I had to say to you. How long do you propose stopping here, this time?”

“I thought of staying a few days, and then——”

“And then of going back to London and making

your offer, I suppose? Will a week give you time enough to pick your opportunity with Miss Vanstone—a week out of the fortnight or so that you have to spare?”

“I will stay here a week, admiral, with pleasure, if you wish it.”

“I don’t wish it. I want you to pack up your traps, and be off to-morrow.”

George looked at his uncle, in silent astonishment.

“You found some letters waiting for you, when you got here,” proceeded the admiral. “Was one of those letters from my old friend, Sir Franklin Brock?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Was it an invitation to you to go and stay at the Grange?”

“Yes, sir.”

“To go at once?”

“At once, if I could manage it.”

“Very good. I want you to manage it. I want you to start for the Grange to-morrow.”

George looked back at the fire, and sighed impatiently.

“I understand you now, admiral,” he said. “You are entirely mistaken in me. My attachment to Miss Vanstone is not to be shaken in *that* manner.”

Admiral Bartram took his quarter-deck walk again, up and down the room.

“One good turn deserves another, George,” said the old gentleman. “If I am willing to make concessions

on my side, the least you can do is to meet me half-way, and make concessions on yours."

"I don't deny it, sir."

"Very well. Now listen to my proposal. Give me a fair hearing, George—a fair hearing is every man's privilege. I will be perfectly just to begin with. I won't attempt to deny that you honestly believe Miss Vanstone is the only woman in the world who can make you happy. I don't question that. What I do question is, whether you really know your own mind in this matter, quite so well as you think you know it yourself. You can't deny, George, that you have been in love with a good many women in your time? Among the rest of them, you have been in love with Miss Brock. No longer ago than this time last year, there was a sneaking kindness between you and that young lady, to say the least of it. And quite right, too! Miss Brock is one of that round dozen of darlings I mentioned over our first glass of wine."

"You are confusing an idle flirtation, sir, with a serious attachment," said George. "You are altogether mistaken—you are indeed."

"Likely enough; I don't pretend to be infallible—I leave that to my juniors. But I happen to have known you, George, since you were the height of my old telescope; and I want to have this serious attachment of yours put to the test. If you can satisfy me that your whole heart and soul are as strongly set on Miss Vanstone, as you suppose them to be—I must knock under to necessity, and keep my objections to myself. But I

must be satisfied first. Go to the Grange to-morrow, and stay there a week in Miss Brock's society. Give that charming girl a fair chance of lighting up the old flame again, if she can—and then come back to St. Crux, and let me hear the result. If you tell me, as an honest man, that your attachment to Miss Vanstone still remains unshaken, you will have heard the last of my objections from that moment. Whatever misgivings I may feel in my own mind, I will say nothing, and do nothing, adverse to your wishes. There is my proposal. I dare say it looks like an old man's folly, in your eyes. But the old man won't trouble you much longer, George—and it may be a pleasant reflection when you have got sons of your own, to remember that you humoured him in his last days."

He came back to the fireplace, as he said those words, and laid his hand once more on his nephew's shoulder. George took the hand and pressed it affectionately. In the tenderest and best sense of the word, his uncle had been a father to him.

"I will do what you ask me, sir," he replied, "if you seriously wish it. But it is only right to tell you that the experiment will be perfectly useless. However, if you prefer my passing a week at the Grange, to my passing it here—to the Grange I will go."

"Thank you, George," said the admiral, bluntly. "I expected as much from you, and you have not disappointed me. If Miss Brock doesn't get us out of this mess," thought the wily old gentleman, as he resumed his place at the table, "my nephew's weathercock of a

head has turned steady with a vengeance ! We'll consider the question settled for to-night, George," he continued aloud, "and call another subject. These family anxieties don't improve the flavour of my old claret. The bottle stands with you. What are they doing at the theatres in London ? We always patronized the theatres, in my time, in the Navy. We used to like a good tragedy to begin with, and a hornpipe to cheer us up at the end of the entertainment."

For the rest of the evening, the talk flowed in the ordinary channels. Admiral Bartram only returned to the forbidden subject, when he and his nephew parted for the night.

"You won't forget to-morrow, George?"

"Certainly not, sir. I'll take the dog-cart, and drive myself over after breakfast."

Before noon the next day, Mr. George Bartram had left the house, and the last chance in Magdalen's favour had left it with him.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN the servants' dinner-bell at St. Crux rang as usual on the day of George Bartram's departure, it was remarked that the new parlour-maid's place at table remained empty. One of the inferior servants was sent to her room to make inquiries, and returned with the information that "Louisa" felt a little faint, and begged that her attendance at table might be excused for that day. Upon this, the superior authority of the housekeeper was invoked; and Mrs. Drake went up stairs immediately to ascertain the truth for herself. Her first look of inquiry satisfied her that the parlour-maid's indisposition, whatever the cause of it might be, was certainly not assumed to serve any idle or sullen purpose of her own. She respectfully declined taking any of the remedies which the housekeeper offered, and merely requested permission to try the efficacy of a walk in the fresh air.

"I have been accustomed to more exercise, ma'am, than I take here," she said. "Might I go into the garden, and try what the air will do for me?"

"Certainly. Can you walk by yourself? or shall I send some one with you?"

“I will go by myself, if you please, ma’am.”

“Very well. Put on your bonnet and shawl—and, when you get out, keep in the east garden. The admiral sometimes walks in the north garden, and he might feel surprised at seeing you there. Come to my room, when you have had air and exercise enough, and let me see how you are.”

In a few minutes more, Magdalen was out in the east garden. The sky was clear and sunny; but the cold shadow of the house rested on the garden walk, and chilled the midday air. She walked towards the ruins of the old monastery, situated on the south side of the more modern range of buildings. Here, there were lonely open spaces to breathe in freely; here, the pale March sunshine stole through the gaps of desolation and decay, and met her invitingly with the genial promise of spring.

She ascended three or four riven stone steps, and seated herself on some ruined fragments beyond them, full in the sunshine. The place she had chosen had once been the entrance to the church. In centuries long gone by, the stream of human sin and human suffering had flowed, day after day, to the confessional, over the place where she now sat. Of all the miserable women who had trodden those old stones in the bygone time, no more miserable creature had touched them, than the woman whose feet rested on them now.

Her hands trembled as she placed them on either side of her, to support herself on the stone seat. She laid them on her lap—they trembled there. She held

them out, and looked at them wonderingly—they trembled as she looked. “Like an old woman!” she said faintly—and let them drop again at her side.

For the first time, that morning, the cruel discovery had forced itself on her mind—the discovery that her strength was failing her, at the time when she had most confidently trusted to it, at the time when she wanted it most. She had felt the surprise of Mr. Bartram’s unexpected departure, as if it had been the shock of the severest calamity that could have befallen her. That one check to her hopes—a check which, at other times, would only have roused the resisting power in her to new efforts—had struck her with as suffocating a terror, had prostrated her with as all-mastering a despair, as if she had been overwhelmed by the crowning disaster of expulsion from St. Crux. But one warning could be read, in such a change as this. Into the space of little more than a year, she had crowded the wearing and wasting emotions of a life. The bountiful gifts of health and strength, so prodigally heaped on her by Nature, so long abused with impunity, were failing her at last.

She looked up at the far faint blue of the sky. She heard the joyous singing of birds among the ivy that clothed the ruins. Oh, the cold distance of the heavens! Oh, the pitiless happiness of the birds! Oh, the lonely horror of sitting there, and feeling old and weak and worn, in the heyday of her youth! She rose with a last effort of resolution, and tried to keep back the hysterical passion swelling at her heart, by

moving and looking about her. Rapidly and more rapidly, she walked to and fro in the sunshine. The exercise helped her, through the very fatigue that she felt from it. She forced the rising tears desperately back to their sources—she fought with the clinging pain, and wrenched it from its hold. Little by little, her mind began to clear again: the despairing fear of herself, grew less vividly present to her thoughts. There were reserves of youth and strength in her, still to be wasted—there was a spirit, sorely wounded, but not yet subdued.

She gradually extended the limits of her walk; she gradually recovered the exercise of her observation.

At the western extremity, the remains of the monastery were in a less ruinous condition than at the eastern. In certain places, where the stout old walls still stood, repairs had been made at some former time. Roofs of red tile had been laid roughly over four of the ancient cells; wooden doors had been added; and the old monastic chambers had been used as sheds to hold the multifarious lumber of St. Crux. No padlocks guarded any of the doors. Magdalen had only to push them, to let the daylight in on the litter inside. She resolved to investigate the sheds, one after the other—not from curiosity; not with the idea of making discoveries of any sort. Her only object was to fill up the vacant time, and to keep the thoughts that unnerved her from returning to her mind.

The first shed she opened, contained the gardener's utensils, large and small. The second was littered

with fragments of broken furniture, empty picture-frames of worm-eaten wood, shattered vases, boxes without covers, and books torn from their bindings. As Magdalen turned to leave the shed, after one careless glance round her at the lumber that it contained, her foot struck something on the ground which tinkled against a fragment of china lying near it. She stooped, and discovered that the tinkling substance was a rusty key.

She picked up the key, and looked at it. She walked out into the air, and considered a little. More old forgotten keys were probably lying about among the lumber in the sheds. What, if she collected all she could find, and tried them, one after another, in the locks of the cabinets and cupboards now closed against her? Was there chance enough that any one of them might fit, to justify her in venturing on the experiment? If the locks at St. Crux were as old-fashioned as the furniture—if there were no protective niceties of modern invention to contend against—there was chance enough beyond all question. Who could say whether the very key in her hand, might not be the lost duplicate of one of the keys on the admiral's bunch? In the dearth of all other means of finding the way to her end, the risk was worth running. A flash of the old spirit sparkled in her weary eyes, as she turned, and re-entered the shed.

Half an hour more brought her to the limits of the time which she could venture to allow herself in the open air. In that interval, she had searched the sheds from first to last, and had found five more keys. "Five

more chances!" she thought to herself, as she hid the keys, and hastily returned to the house.

After first reporting herself in the housekeeper's room, she went upstairs to remove her bonnet and shawl; taking that opportunity to hide the keys in her bedchamber, until night came. They were crusted thick with rust and dirt; but she dared not attempt to clean them, until bedtime secluded her from the prying eyes of the servants, in the solitude of her room.

When the dinner hour brought her, as usual, into personal contact with the admiral, she was at once struck by a change in him. For the first time in her experience, the old gentleman was silent and depressed. He ate less than usual, and he hardly said five words to her, from the beginning of the meal to the end. Some unwelcome subject of reflection had evidently fixed itself on his mind, and remained there persistently, in spite of his efforts to shake it off. At intervals through the evening, she wondered with an ever-growing perplexity what the subject could be.

At last, the lagging hours reached their end, and bedtime came. Before she slept that night, Magdalen had cleaned the keys from all impurities, and had oiled the wards, to help them smoothly into the locks. The last difficulty that remained, was the difficulty of choosing the time when the experiment might be tried, with the least risk of interruption and discovery. After carefully considering the question overnight, Magdalen could only resolve to wait and be guided by the events of the next day.

The morning came ; and, for the first time at St. Crux, events justified the trust she had placed in them. The morning came—and the one remaining difficulty that perplexed her, was unexpectedly smoothed away by no less a person than the admiral himself ! To the surprise of every one in the house, he announced at breakfast, that he had arranged to start for London in an hour ; that he should pass the night in town ; and that he might be expected to return to St. Crux in time for dinner on the next day. He volunteered no further explanations, to the housekeeper, or to any one else—but it was easy to see that his errand to London was of no ordinary importance in his own estimation. He swallowed his breakfast in a violent hurry ; and he was impatiently ready for the carriage before it came to the door.

Experience had taught Magdalen to be cautious. She waited a little, after Admiral Bartram's departure, before she ventured on trying her experiment with the keys. It was well she did so. Mrs. Drake took advantage of the admiral's absence to review the condition of the apartments on the first floor. The results of the investigation by no means satisfied her ; brooms and dusters were set to work ; and the housemaids were in and out of the rooms perpetually, as long as the daylight lasted.

The evening passed ; and still the safe opportunity for which Magdalen was on the watch, never presented itself. Bedtime came again ; and found her placed between the two alternatives of trusting to the doubtful

chances of the next morning—or of trying the keys boldly in the dead of night. In former times, she would have made her choice without hesitation. She hesitated now—but the wreck of her old courage still sustained her, and she determined to make the venture at night.

They kept early hours at St. Crux. If she waited in her room until half-past eleven, she would wait long enough. At that time, she stole out on to the staircase, with the keys in her pocket, and the candle in her hand.

On passing the entrance to the corridor on the bedroom floor, she stopped and listened. No sound of snoring, no shuffling of infirm footsteps, was to be heard on the other side of the screen. She looked round it distrustfully. The stone passage was a solitude, and the truckle-bed was empty. Her own eyes had shown her old Mazey on his way to the upper regions, more than an hour since, with a candle in his hand. Had he taken advantage of his master's absence, to enjoy the unaccustomed luxury of sleeping in a room? As the thought occurred to her, a sound from the farther end of the corridor just caught her ear. She softly advanced towards it; and heard through the door of the last and remotest of the spare bed-chambers, the veteran's lusty snoring in the room inside. The discovery was startling, in more senses than one. It deepened the impenetrable mystery of the truckle-bed: for it showed plainly that old Mazey had no barbarous preference of his own for passing his nights in the

corridor—he occupied that strange and comfortless sleeping-place, purely and entirely on his master's account.

It was no time for dwelling on the reflections which this conclusion might suggest. Magdalen retraced her steps along the passage, and descended to the first floor. Passing the doors nearest to her, she tried the library first. On the staircase, and in the corridors, she had felt her heart throbbing fast with an unutterable fear—but a sense of security returned to her when she found herself within the four walls of the room, and when she had closed the door on the ghostly quiet outside.

The first lock she tried was the lock of the table-drawer. None of the keys fitted it. Her next experiment was made on the cabinet. Would the second attempt fail, like the first?

No! One of the keys fitted; one of the keys, with a little patient management, turned the lock. She looked in eagerly. There were open shelves above, and one long drawer under them. The shelves were devoted to specimens of curious minerals, neatly labelled and arranged. The drawer was divided into compartments. Two of the compartments contained papers. In the first, she discovered nothing but a collection of receipted bills. In the second, she found a heap of business-documents—but the writing, yellow with age, was enough of itself to warn her that the Trust was not there. She shut the doors of the cabinet; and, after locking them again with some little

difficulty, proceeded to try the keys in the book-case cupboards next, before she continued her investigations in the other rooms.

The book-case cupboards were unassailable; the drawers and cupboards in all the other rooms were unassailable. One after another, she tried them patiently in regular succession. It was useless. The chance which the cabinet in the library had offered in her favour, was the first chance and the last.

She went back to her room; seeing nothing but her own gliding shadow; hearing nothing but her own stealthy footfall in the midnight stillness of the house. After mechanically putting the keys away in their former hiding-place, she looked towards her bed—and turned away from it, shuddering. The warning remembrance of what she had suffered that morning in the garden, was vividly present to her mind. “Another chance tried,” she thought to herself, “and another chance lost! I shall break down again if I think of it—and I shall think of it, if I lie awake in the dark.” She had brought a work-box with her to St. Crux, as one of the many little things which in her character of a servant it was desirable to possess; and she now opened the box, and applied herself resolutely to work. Her want of dexterity with her needle, assisted the object she had in view; it obliged her to pay the closest attention to her employment; it forced her thoughts away from the two subjects of all others which she now dreaded most—herself and the future.

The next day, as he had arranged, the admiral

returned. His visit to London had not improved his spirits. The shadow of some unconquerable doubt still clouded his face : his restless tongue was strangely quiet, while Magdalen waited on him at his solitary meal. That night, the snoring resounded once more on the inner side of the screen, and old Mazey was back again in the comfortless truckle-bed.

Three more days passed—April came. On the second of the month—returning as unexpectedly as he had departed a week before—Mr. George Bartram reappeared at St. Crux.

He came back early in the afternoon ; and had an interview with his uncle in the library. The interview over, he left the house again ; and was driven to the railway by the groom, in time to catch the last train to London that night. The groom noticed, on the road, that “Mr. George seemed to be rather pleased than otherwise at leaving St. Crux.” He also remarked, on his return, that the admiral swore at him for over-driving the horses—an indication of ill temper, on the part of his master, which he described as being entirely without precedent, in all his former experience. Magdalen, in her department of service, had suffered in like manner under the old man’s irritable humour : he had been dissatisfied with everything she did in the dining-room ; and he had found fault with all the dishes, one after another, from the mutton broth to the toasted cheese.

The next two days passed as usual. On the third day, an event happened. In appearance, it was

nothing more important than a ring at the drawing-room bell. In reality, it was the forerunner of approaching catastrophe—the formidable herald of the end.

It was Magdalen's business to answer the bell. On reaching the drawing-room door, she knocked as usual. There was no reply. After again knocking, and again receiving no answer, she ventured into the room—and was instantly met by a current of cold air flowing full on her face. The heavy sliding door in the opposite wall was pushed back, and the Arctic atmosphere of Freeze-your-Bones was pouring unhindered into the empty room.

She waited, near the door, doubtful what to do next ; it was certainly the drawing-room bell that had rung, and no other. She waited, looking through the open doorway opposite, down the wilderness of the dismantled Hall.

A little consideration satisfied her that it would be best to go down stairs again, and wait there for a second summons from the bell. On turning to leave the room, she happened to look back once more ; and, exactly at that moment, she saw the door open at the opposite extremity of the Banqueting Hall—the door leading into the first of the apartments in the east wing. A tall man came out, wearing his greatcoat and his hat, and rapidly approached the drawing-room. His gait betrayed him, while he was still too far off for his features to be seen. Before he was quite half-way across the Hall, Magdalen had recognized—the admiral.

He looked, not irritated only, but surprised as well, at finding his parlour-maid waiting for him in the drawing-room, and inquired, sharply and suspiciously—what she wanted there? Magdalen replied that she had come there to answer the bell. His face cleared a little, when he heard the explanation. “Yes, yes; to be sure,” he said. “I did ring, and then I forgot it.” He pulled the sliding-door back into its place as he spoke. “Coals,” he resumed, impatiently, pointing to the empty scuttle. “I rang for coals.”

Magdalen went back to the kitchen regions. After communicating the admiral’s order to the servant whose special duty it was to attend to the fires, she returned to the pantry; and gently closing the door, sat down alone to think.

It had been her impression in the drawing-room—and it was her impression still—that she had accidentally surprised Admiral Bartram on a visit to the east rooms, which, for some urgent reason of his own, he wished to keep a secret. Haunted day and night by the one dominant idea that now possessed her, she leapt all logical difficulties at a bound; and at once associated the suspicion of a secret proceeding on the admiral’s part, with the kindred suspicion which pointed to him as the depositary of the Secret Trust. Up to this time, it had been her settled belief that he kept all his important documents in one or other of the suite of rooms which he happened to be occupying for the time being. Why—she now asked herself, with a sudden distrust of the conclusion which had hitherto

satisfied her mind—why might he not lock some of them up in the other rooms as well? The remembrance of the keys still concealed in their hiding-place in her room, sharpened her sense of the reasonableness of this new view. With one unimportant exception, those keys had all failed when she tried them in the rooms on the north side of the house. Might they not succeed with the cabinets and cupboards in the east rooms, on which she had never tried them or thought of trying them, yet? If there was a chance, however small, of turning them to better account than she had turned them thus far, it was a chance to be tried. If there was a possibility, however remote, that the Trust might be hidden in any one of the locked repositories in the east wing, it was a possibility to be put to the test. When? Her own experience answered the question. At the time when no prying eyes were open, and no accidents were to be feared—when the house was quiet—in the dead of night.

She knew enough of her changed self to dread the enervating influence of delay. She determined to run the risk, headlong, that night.

More blunders escaped her, when dinner-time came; the admiral's criticisms on her waiting at table were sharper than ever. His hardest words inflicted no pain on her; she scarcely heard him—her mind was dull to every sense but the sense of the coming trial. The evening which had passed slowly to her on the night of her first experiment with the keys, passed quickly now. When bedtime came, bedtime took her by surprise.

She waited longer, on this occasion, than she had waited before. The admiral was at home ; he might alter his mind and go down stairs again, after he had gone up to his room ; he might have forgotten something in the library, and might return to fetch it. Midnight struck from the clock in the servants' hall, before she ventured out of her room, with the keys again in her pocket, with the candle again in her hand.

At the first of the stairs on which she set her foot to descend, an all-mastering hesitation, an unintelligible shrinking from some peril unknown, seized her on a sudden. She waited, and reasoned with herself. She had recoiled from no sacrifices, she had yielded to no fears, in carrying out the stratagem by which she had gained admission to St. Crux ; and now, when the long array of difficulties at the outset had been patiently conquered,—now, when by sheer force of resolution the starting-point was gained, she hesitated to advance. “I shrank from nothing to get here,” she said to herself. “What madness possesses me that I shrink now?”

Every pulse in her quickened at the thought, with an animating shame that nerved her to go on. She descended the stairs, from the third floor to the second, from the second to the first, without trusting herself to pause again within easy reach of her own room. In another minute, she had reached the end of the corridor, had crossed the vestibule, and had entered the drawing-room. It was only when her grasp was on the heavy brass handle of the sliding-door—it was only at

the moment before she pushed the door back—that she waited to take breath. The Banqueting-Hall was close on the other side of the wooden partition against which she stood : her excited imagination felt the death-like chill of it flowing over her already.

She pushed back the sliding-door a few inches—and stopped in momentary alarm. When the admiral had closed it in her presence that day, she had heard no noise. When old Mazey had opened it to show her the rooms in the east wing, she had heard no noise. Now, in the night silence, she noticed for the first time, that the door made a sound—a dull, rushing sound, like the wind.

She roused herself, and pushed it farther back—pushed it half way into the hollow chamber in the wall constructed to receive it. She advanced boldly into the gap, and met the night-view of the Banqueting-Hall face to face.

The moon was rounding the southern side of the house. Her paling beams streamed through the nearer windows, and lay in long strips of slanting light on the marble pavement of the Hall. The black shadows of the pediments between each window, alternating with the strips of light, heightened the wan glare of the moonshine on the floor. Towards its lower end, the Hall melted mysteriously into darkness. The ceiling was lost to view ; the yawning fireplace, the overhanging mantelpiece, the long row of battle-pictures above, were all swallowed up in night. But one visible object was discernible, besides the gleaming windows and the

moon-striped floor. Midway in the last and farthest of the strips of light, the tripod rose erect on its gaunt black legs, like a monster called to life by the moon—a monster rising through the light, and melting invisibly into the upper shadows of the Hall. Far and near, all sound lay dead, drowned in the stagnant cold. The soothing hush of night was awful here. The deep abysses of darkness hid abysses of silence more immeasurable still.

She stood motionless in the doorway, with straining eyes, with straining ears. She looked for some moving thing, she listened for some rising sound—and looked and listened in vain. A quick ceaseless shivering ran through her from head to foot. The shivering of fear? or the shivering of cold? The bare doubt roused her resolute will. “Now,” she thought, advancing a step through the doorway—“or never! I’ll count the strips of moonlight three times over—and cross the Hall.”

“One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five.”

As the final number passed her lips at the third time of counting, she crossed the Hall. Looking for nothing, listening for nothing, one hand holding the candle, the other mechanically grasping the folds of her dress—she sped ghostlike down the length of the ghostly place. She reached the door of the first of the eastern rooms—opened it—and ran in. The sudden relief of attaining a refuge, the sudden entrance into a new atmosphere, overpowered her for the moment. She

had just time to put the candle safely on a table, before she dropped giddy and breathless into the nearest chair.

Little by little, she felt the rest quieting her. In a few minutes, she became conscious of the triumph of having won her way to the east rooms. In a few minutes, she was strong enough to rise from the chair, to take the keys from her pocket, and to look round her.

The first objects of furniture in the room which attracted her attention, were an old bureau of carved oak, and a heavy buhl table with a cabinet attached. She tried the bureau first: it looked the likeliest receptacle for papers of the two. Three of the keys proved to be of a size to enter the lock—but none of them would turn it. The bureau was unassailable. She left it, and paused to trim the wick of the candle before she tried the buhl cabinet next.

At the moment when she raised her hand to the candle, she heard the stillness of the Banqueting-Hall shudder with the terror of a sound—a sound, faint and momentary, like the distant rushing of the wind.

The sliding-door in the drawing-room had moved.

Which way had it moved? Had an unknown hand pushed it back in its socket, farther than she had pushed it—or pulled it to again, and closed it? The horror of being shut out all night, by some undiscoverable agency, from the life of the house, was stronger in her than the horror of looking across the Banqueting-Hall. She made desperately for the door of the room.

It had fallen to silently after her, when she had come

in, but it was not closed. She pulled it open—and looked.

The sight that met her eyes, rooted her panic-stricken to the spot.

Close to the first of the row of windows, counting from the drawing-room, and full in the gleam of it, she saw a solitary figure. It stood motionless, rising out of the farthest strip of moonlight on the floor. As she looked, it suddenly disappeared. In another instant, she saw it again, in the second strip of moonlight—lost it again—saw it in the third strip—lost it once more—and saw it in the fourth. Moment by moment, it advanced, now mysteriously lost in the shadow, now suddenly visible again in the light, until it reached the fifth and nearest strip of moonlight. There it paused, and strayed aside slowly to the middle of the Hall. It stopped at the tripod, and stood, shivering audibly in the silence, with its hands raised over the dead ashes, in the action of warming them at a fire. It turned back again, moving down the path of the moonlight—stopped at the fifth window—turned once more—and came on softly through the shadow, straight to the place where Magdalen stood.

Her voice was dumb, her will was helpless. Every sense in her but the seeing-sense, was paralyzed. The seeing-sense—held fast in the fetters of its own terror—looked unchangeably straightforward, as it had looked from the first. There she stood in the doorway, full in the path of the figure advancing on her through the shadow, nearer and nearer, step by step.

It came close.

The bonds of horror that held her, burst asunder when it was within arm's length. She started back. The light of the candle on the table fell full on its face, and showed her—Admiral Bartram.

A long grey dressing-gown was wrapped round him. His head was uncovered; his feet were bare. In his left hand he carried his little basket of keys. He passed Magdalen slowly; his lips whispering without intermission; his open eyes staring straight before him, with the glassy stare of death. His eyes revealed to her the terrifying truth. He was walking in his sleep.

The terror of seeing him, as she saw him now, was not the terror she had felt when her eyes first lighted on him—an apparition in the moonlight, a spectre in the ghostly Hall. This time, she could struggle against the shock; she could feel the depth of her own fear.

He passed her, and stopped in the middle of the room. Magdalen ventured near enough to him to be within reach of his voice, as he muttered to himself. She ventured nearer still, and heard the name of her dead husband fall distinctly from the sleep-walker's lips.

"Noel!" he said, in the low monotonous tones of a dreamer talking in his sleep. "My good fellow, Noel, take it back again! It worries me day and night. I don't know where it's safe; I don't know where to put it. Take it back, Noel—take it back!"

As those words escaped him, he walked to the buhl cabinet. He sat down in the chair placed before it,

and searched in the basket among his keys. Magdalen softly followed him, and stood behind his chair, waiting with the candle in her hand. He found the key, and unlocked the cabinet. Without an instant's hesitation, he drew out a drawer, the second of a row. The one thing in the drawer, was a folded letter. He removed it, and put it down before him on the table. "Take it back, Noel!" he repeated, mechanically; "take it back!"

Magdalen looked over his shoulder, and read these lines, traced in her husband's handwriting, at the top of the letter:—*To be kept in your own possession, and to be opened by yourself only, on the day of my decease. Noel Vanstone.* She saw the words plainly, with the admiral's name and the admiral's address written under them.

The Trust within reach of her hand! The Trust traced to its hiding-place at last!

She took one step forward, to steal round his chair and to snatch the letter from the table. At the instant when she moved, he took it up once more; locked the cabinet; and, rising, turned and faced her.

In the impulse of the moment, she stretched out her hand towards the hand in which he held the letter. The yellow candlelight fell full on him. The awful death-in-life of his face—the mystery of the sleeping body, moving in unconscious obedience to the dreaming mind—daunted her. Her hand trembled, and dropped again at her side.

He put the key of the cabinet back in the basket.

and crossed the room to the bureau, with the basket in one hand, and the letter in the other. Magdalen set the candle on the table again, and watched him. As he had opened the cabinet, so he now opened the bureau. Once more, Magdalen stretched out her hand; and once more she recoiled before the mystery and the terror of his sleep. He put the letter in a drawer, at the back of the bureau, and closed the heavy oaken lid again. "Yes," he said. "Safer there, as you say, Noel—safer there." So he spoke. So, time after time, the words that betrayed him, revealed the dead man living and speaking again in the dream.

Had he locked the bureau? Magdalen had not heard the lock turn. As he slowly moved away, walking back once more towards the middle of the room, she tried the lid. It was locked. That discovery made, she looked to see what he was doing next. He was leaving the room again, with his basket of keys in his hand. When her first glance overtook him, he was crossing the threshold of the door.

Some inscrutable fascination possessed her; some mysterious attraction drew her after him, in spite of herself. She took up the candle, and followed him mechanically, as if she too were walking in her sleep. One behind the other, in slow and noiseless progress, they crossed the Banqueting-Hall. One behind the other, they passed through the drawing-room, and along the corridor, and up the stairs. She followed him to his own door. He went in, and shut it behind him softly. She stopped, and looked towards the

truckle-bed. It was pushed aside at the foot, some little distance away from the bedroom door. Who had moved it? She held the candle close, and looked towards the pillow, with a sudden curiosity and a sudden doubt.

The truckle-bed was empty.

The discovery startled her for the moment, and for the moment only. Plain as the inferences were to be drawn from it, she never drew them. Her mind, slowly recovering the exercise of its faculties, was still under the influence of the earlier and the deeper impressions produced on it. Her mind followed the admiral into his room, as her body had followed him across the Banqueting-Hall.

Had he lain down again in his bed? Was he still asleep? She listened at the door. Not a sound was audible in the room. She tried the door; and, finding it not locked, softly opened it a few inches, and listened again. The rise and fall of his low, regular breathing instantly caught her ear. He was still asleep.

She went into the room, and, shading the candle-light with her hand, approached the bed-side to look at him. The dream was past; the old man's sleep was deep and peaceful—his lips were still; his quiet hand was laid over the coverlet, in motionless repose. He lay with his face turned towards the right-hand side of the bed. A little table stood there, within reach of his hand. Four objects were placed on it: his candle his matches; his customary night-drink of lemonade—and his basket of keys.

The idea of possessing herself of his keys that night (if an opportunity offered when the basket was not in his hand), had first crossed her mind when she saw him go into his room. She had lost it again, for the moment, in the surprise of discovering the empty truckle-bed. She now recovered it, the instant the table attracted her attention. It was useless to waste time in trying to choose the one key wanted from the rest—the one key was not well enough known to her to be readily identified. She took all the keys from the table, in the basket as they lay, and noiselessly closed the door behind her, on leaving the room.

The truckle-bed, as she passed it, obtruded itself again on her attention ; and forced her to think of it. After a moment's consideration, she moved the foot of the bed back to its customary position across the door. Whether he was in the house or out of it, the veteran might return to his deserted post at any moment. If he saw the bed moved from its usual place, he might suspect something wrong—he might rouse his master—and the loss of the keys might be discovered.

Nothing happened as she descended the stairs ; nothing happened as she passed along the corridor—the house was as silent and as solitary as ever. She crossed the Banqueting-Hall, this time, without hesitation ; the events of the night had hardened her mind against all imaginary terrors. “Now I have got it!” she whispered to herself, in an irrepressible outburst of exultation, as she entered the first of the east rooms, and put her candle on the top of the old bureau.

Even yet, there was a trial in store for her patience. Some minutes elapsed, minutes that seemed hours, before she found the right key, and raised the lid of the bureau. At last, she drew out the inner drawer! At last, she had the letter in her hand!

It had been sealed, but the seal was broken. She opened it on the spot, to make sure that she had actually possessed herself of the Trust, before leaving the room. The end of the letter was the first part of it she turned to. It came to its conclusion high on the third page, and it was signed by Noel Vanstone. Below the name, these lines were added in the admiral's handwriting:—

“This letter was received by me, at the same time with the will of my friend, Noel Vanstone. In the event of my death, without leaving any other directions respecting it, I beg my nephew and my executors to understand that I consider the requests made in this document as absolutely binding on me. — ARTHUR EVERARD BARTRAM.”

She left those lines unread. She just noticed that they were not in Noel Vanstone's handwriting; and, passing over them instantly, as immaterial to the object in view, turned the leaves of the letter, and transferred her attention to the opening sentences on the first page.

She read these words:—

“DEAR ADMIRAL BARTRAM,

“When you open my Will (in which you are named my sole executor), you will find that I have

bequeathed the whole residue of my estate—after payment of one legacy of five thousand pounds—to yourself. It is the purpose of my letter to tell you privately what the object is for which I have left you the fortune which is now placed in your hands.

“I beg you to consider this large legacy as intended——”

She had proceeded thus far, with breathless curiosity and interest—when her attention suddenly failed her. Something—she was too deeply absorbed to know what—had got between her and the letter. Was it a sound in the Banqueting-Hall again? She looked over her shoulder at the door behind her, and listened. Nothing was to be heard; nothing was to be seen. She returned to the letter.

The writing was cramped and close. In her impatient curiosity to read more, she failed to find the lost place again. Her eyes, attracted by a blot, lighted on a sentence lower in the page than the sentence at which she had left off. The first three words she saw, riveted her attention anew—they were the first words she had met with in the letter which directly referred to George Bartram. In the sudden excitement of that discovery, she read the rest of the sentence eagerly, before she made any second attempt to return to the lost place:—

“If your nephew fails to comply with these conditions—that is to say, if being either a bachelor or a widower at the time of my decease, he fails to marry in

all respects as I have here instructed him to marry, within Six calendar months from that time—it is my desire that he shall not receive——”

She had read to that point, to that last word, and no farther—when a Hand passed suddenly from behind her, between the letter and her eye, and gripped her fast by the wrist in an instant.

She turned with a shriek of terror; and found herself face to face with old Mazey.

The veteran's eyes were bloodshot; his hand was heavy; his list slippers were twisted crookedly on his feet; and his body swayed to and fro on his widely-parted legs. If he had tested his condition, that night, by the unfailing criterion of the model ship, he must have inevitably pronounced sentence on himself in the usual form:—“Drunk again, Mazey; drunk again.”

“You young Jezabel!” said the old sailor, with a leer on one side of his face, and a frown on the other. “The next time you take to night-walking in the neighbourhood of Freeze-your-Bones, use those sharp eyes of yours first, and make sure there's nobody else night-walking in the garden outside. Drop it, Jezabel!—drop it!”

Keeping fast hold of Magdalen's arm with one hand, he took the letter from her with the other, put it back into the open drawer, and locked the bureau. She never struggled with him, she never spoke. Her energy was gone; her powers of resistance were crushed. The terrors of that horrible night, following

one close on the other in reiterated shocks, had struck her down at last. She yielded as submissively, she trembled as helplessly, as the weakest woman living.

Old Mazey dropped her arm, and pointed with drunken solemnity to a chair in an inner corner of the room. She sat down, still without uttering a word. The veteran (breathing very hard over it) steadied himself on both elbows against the slanting top of the bureau, and from that commanding position, addressed Magdalen once more.

“Come and be locked up!” said old Mazey, wagging his venerable head with judicial severity. “There’ll be a court of inquiry to-morrow morning; and I’m witness—worse luck!—I’m witness. You young jade, you’ve committed burglary—that’s what you’ve done. His honour the admiral’s keys stolen; his honour the admiral’s desk ramsacked; and his honour the admiral’s private letters broke open. Burglary! Burglary! Come and be locked up!” He slowly recovered an upright position, with the assistance of his hands, backed by the solid resisting power of the bureau; and lapsed into lachrymose soliloquy. “Who’d have thought it?” said old Mazey, paternally watering at the eyes. “Take the outside of her, and she’s as straight as a poplar; take the inside of her, and she’s as crooked as Sin. Such a fine-grown girl, too. What a pity! what a pity!”

“Don’t hurt me!” said Magdalen faintly, as old Mazey staggered up to the chair, and took her by the

wrist again. "I'm frightened, Mr. Mazey — I'm dreadfully frightened."

"Hurt you?" repeated the veteran. "I'm a deal too fond of you—and more shame for me at my age! —to hurt you. If I let go of your wrist, will you walk straight before me, where I can see you all the way? Will you be a good girl, and walk straight up to your own door?"

Magdalen gave the promise required of her—gave it with an eager longing to reach the refuge of her room. She rose, and tried to take the candle from the bureau—but old Mazey's cunning hand was too quick for her. "Let the candle be," said the veteran, winking in momentary forgetfulness of his responsible position. "You're a trifle quicker on your legs than I am, my dear—and you might leave me in the lurch, if I don't carry the light."

They returned to the inhabited side of the house. Staggering after Magdalen, with the basket of keys in one hand, and the candle in the other, old Mazey sorrowfully compared her figure with the straightness of the poplar, and her disposition with the crookedness of Sin, all the way across "Freeze-your-Bones," and all the way up-stairs to her own door. Arrived at that destination, he peremptorily refused to give her the candle, until he had first seen her safely inside the room. The conditions being complied with, he resigned the light with one hand, and made a dash with the other at the key—drew it from the inside of the lock—and instantly closed the door. Magdalen heard him

outside, chuckling over his own dexterity, and fitting the key into the lock again, with infinite difficulty. At last he secured the door, with a deep grunt of relief. "There she is safe!" Magdalen heard him say, in regretful soliloquy. "As fine a girl as ever I set eyes on. What a pity! what a pity!"

The last sounds of his voice died out in the distance; and she was left alone in her room.

Holding fast by the banister, old Mazey made his way down to the corridor on the second floor, in which a night-light was always burning. He advanced to the truckle-bed; and, steadying himself against the opposite wall, looked at it attentively. Prolonged contemplation of his own resting-place for the night, apparently failed to satisfy him. He shook his head ominously; and, taking from the side-pocket of his great-coat a pair of old patched slippers, surveyed them with an aspect of illimitable doubt. "I'm all abroad to-night," he mumbled to himself. "Troubled in my mind—that's what it is—troubled in my mind."

The old patched slippers and the veteran's existing perplexities, happened to be intimately associated, one with the other, in the relation of cause and effect. The slippers belonged to the admiral, who had taken one of his unreasonable fancies to this particular pair, and who still persisted in wearing them, long after they were unfit for his service. Early that afternoon, old Mazey had taken the slippers to the village cobbler to get them repaired on the spot, before his master called

for them the next morning. He sat superintending the progress and completion of the work, until evening came; when he and the cobbler betook themselves to the village inn to drink each other's healths at parting. They had prolonged this social ceremony till far into the night; and they had parted, as a necessary consequence, in a finished and perfect state of intoxication on either side.

If the drinking-bout had led to no other result than those night wanderings in the grounds of St. Crux, which had shown old Mazey the light in the east windows, his memory would unquestionably have presented it to him the next morning, in the aspect of one of the praiseworthy achievements of his life. But another consequence had sprung from it, which the old sailor now saw dimly, through the interposing bewilderment left in his brain by the drink. He had committed a breach of discipline, and a breach of trust. In plainer words, he had deserted his post.

The one safeguard against Admiral Bartram's constitutional tendency to somnambulism, was the watch and ward which his faithful old servant kept outside his door. No entreaties had ever prevailed on him to submit to the usual precaution taken in such cases. He peremptorily declined to be locked into his room; he even ignored his own liability, whenever a dream disturbed him, to walk in his sleep. Over and over again, old Mazey had been roused by the admiral's attempts to push past the truckle-bed, or to step over it, in his sleep; and over and over again, when the veteran

had reported the fact the next morning, his master had declined to believe him. As the old sailor now stood, staring in vacant inquiry at the bedchamber door, these incidents of the past rose confusedly on his memory, and forced on him the serious question, whether the admiral had left his room during the earlier hours of the night? If by any mischance the sleep-walking fit had seized him, the slippers in old Mazey's hand pointed straight to the conclusion that followed—his master must have passed barefoot in the cold night, over the stone stairs and passages of St. Crux. "Lord send he's been quiet!" muttered old Mazey, daunted, bold as he was and drunk as he was, by the bare contemplation of that prospect. "If his honour's been walking to-night, it will be the death of him!"

He roused himself for the moment, by main force—strong in his dog-like fidelity to the admiral, though strong in nothing else—and fought off the stupor of the drink. He looked at the bed, with steadier eyes and a clearer mind. Magdalen's precaution in returning it to its customary position, presented it to him necessarily in the aspect of a bed which had never been moved from its place. He next examined the counterpane carefully. Not the faintest vestige appeared of the indentation which must have been left by footsteps passing over it. There was the plain evidence before him—the evidence recognizable at last by his own bewildered eyes—that the admiral had never moved from his room. "I'll take the Pledge to-morrow!" mumbled old Mazey, in an outburst of

grateful relief. The next moment the fumes of the liquor flowed back insidiously over his brain; and the veteran, returning to his customary remedy, paced the passage in zigzag as usual, and kept watch on the deck of an imaginary ship.

Soon after sunrise, Magdalen suddenly heard the grating of the key from outside, in the lock of the door. The door opened, and old Mazey reappeared on the threshold. The first fever of his intoxication had cooled, with time, into a mild penitential glow. He breathed harder than ever, in a succession of low growls, and wagged his venerable head at his own delinquencies, without intermission.

"How are you now, you young land-shark in petticoats?" inquired the old sailor. "Has your conscience been quiet enough to let you go to sleep?"

"I have not slept," said Magdalen, drawing back from him in doubt of what he might do next. "I have no remembrance of what happened after you locked the door—I think I must have fainted. Don't frighten me again, Mr. Mazey! I feel miserably weak and ill. What do you want?"

"I want to say something serious," replied old Mazey, with impenetrable solemnity. "It's been on my mind to come here, and make a clean breast of it, for the last hour or more. Mark my words, young woman. I'm going to disgrace myself."

Magdalen drew further and further back, and looked at him in rising alarm.

"I know my duty to his honour the admiral," proceeded old Mazey, waving his hand drearily in the direction of his master's door. "But, try as hard as I may, I can't find it in my heart, you young jade, to be witness against you. I liked the make of you (specially about the waist) when you first came into the house, and I can't help liking the make of you still—though you *have* committed burglary, and though you *are* as crooked as Sin. I've cast the eyes of indulgence on fine-grown girls all my life—and it's too late in the day to cast the eyes of severity on 'em now. I'm seventy-seven, or seventy-eight, I don't rightly know which. I'm a battered old hulk, with my seams opening, and my pumps choked, and the waters of Death powering in on me as fast as they can. I'm as miserable a sinner as you'll meet with anywhere in these parts—Thomas Nagle, the cobbler, only excepted; and he's worse than I am, for he's the youngest of the two, and he ought to know better. But the long and the short of it is, I shall go down to my grave, with an eye of indulgence for a fine-grown girl. More shame for me, you young Jezabel—more shame for me!"

The veteran's unmanageable eyes began to leer again in spite of him, as he concluded his harangue in these terms: the last reserves of austerity left in his face, entrenched themselves dismally round the corners of his mouth. Magdalen approached him again, and tried to speak. He solemnly motioned her back, with another dreary wave of his hand.

"No carneying!" said old Mazey; "I'm bad

enough already, without that. It's my duty to make my report to his honour the admiral; and I *will* make it. But if you like to give the house the slip, before the burglary's reported, and the court of inquiry begins—I'll disgrace myself by letting you go. It's market morning at Ossory; and Dawkes will be driving the light cart over, in a quarter of an hour's time. Dawkes will take you, if I ask him. I know my duty—my duty is to turn the key on you, and see Dawkes damned first. But I can't find it in my heart to be hard on a fine girl like you. It's bred in the bone, and it wunt come out of the flesh. More shame for me, I tell you again—more shame for me!"

The proposal thus strangely and suddenly presented to her, took Magdalen completely by surprise. She had been far too seriously shaken by the events of the night, to be capable of deciding on any subject at a moment's notice. "You are very good to me, Mr. Mazey," she said. "May I have a minute by myself to think?"

"Yes, you may," replied the veteran, facing about forthwith, and leaving the room. "They're all alike," proceeded old Mazey, with his head still running on the sex. "Whatever you offer 'em, they always want something more. Tall and short, native and foreign, sweethearts and wives—they're all alike!"

Left by herself, Magdalen reached her decision, with far less difficulty than she had anticipated.

If she remained in the house, there were only two courses before her—to charge old Mazey with speaking under the influence of a drunken delusion, or to

submit to circumstances. Though she owed to the old sailor her defeat in the very hour of success, his consideration for her at that moment, forbade the idea of defending herself at his expense—even supposing, what was in the last degree improbable, that the defence would be credited. In the second of the two cases (the case of submission to circumstances), but one result could be expected—instant dismissal; and perhaps, discovery as well. What object was to be gained by braving that degradation—by leaving the house, publicly disgraced in the eyes of the servants who had hated and distrusted her from the first? The accident which had literally snatched the Trust from her possession when she had it in her hand, was irreparable. The one apparent compensation under the disaster—in other words, the discovery that the Trust actually existed, and that George Bartram's marriage within a given time, was one of the objects contained in it—was a compensation which could only be estimated at its true value, by placing it under the light of Mr. Loscombe's experience. Every motive of which she was conscious, was a motive which urged her to leave the house secretly, while the chance was at her disposal. She looked out into the passage, and called softly to old Mazey to come back.

“I accept your offer thankfully, Mr. Mazey,” she said. “You don't know what hard measure you dealt out to me, when you took that letter from my hand. But you did your duty—and I can be grateful to you for sparing me this morning, hard as you were upon

me last night. I am not such a bad girl as you think me—I am not indeed.”

Old Mazey dismissed the subject, with another dreary wave of his hand.

“Let it be,” said the veteran; “let it be! It makes no difference, my girl, to such an old rascal as I am. If you were fifty times worse than you are, I should let you go all the same. Put on your bonnet and shawl, and come along. I’m a disgrace to myself and a warning to others—that’s what I am. No luggage, mind! Leave all your rattle-traps behind you: to be overhauled, if necessary, at his honour the admiral’s discretion. I can be hard enough on your boxes, you young Jezabel; if I can’t be hard on *you*.”

With those words, old Mazey led the way out of the room. “The less I see of her the better—especially about the waist,” he said to himself, as he hobbled down stairs with the help of the banisters.

The cart was standing in the back-yard, when they reached the lower regions of the house; and Dawkes (otherwise the farm-bailiff’s man) was fastening the last buckle of the horse’s harness. The hoar frost of the morning was still white in the shade. The sparkling points of it glistened brightly on the shaggy coats of Brutus and Cassius, as they idled about the yard, waiting, with steaming mouths and slowly-wagging tails, to see the cart drive off. Old Mazey went out alone, and used his influence with Dawkes; who, staring in stolid amazement, put a leather-cushion on the cart-seat for his fellow-traveller. Shivering in the sharp morning air,

Magdalen waited, while the preliminaries of departure were in progress, conscious of nothing but a giddy bewilderment of thought, and a helpless suspension of feeling. The events of the night confused themselves hideously, with the trivial circumstances passing before her eyes in the court-yard. She started with the sudden terror of the night, when old Mazey reappeared to summon her out to the cart. She trembled with the helpless confusion of the night, when the veteran cast the eyes of indulgence on her for the last time, and gave her a kiss on the cheek at parting. The next minute, she felt him help her into the cart, and pat her on the back. The next, she heard him tell her in a confidential whisper that, sitting or standing, she was as straight as a poplar, either way. Then there was a pause, in which nothing was said, and nothing done; and then the driver took the reins in hand, and mounted to his place.

She roused herself at the parting moment, and looked back. The last sight she saw at St. Crux, was old Mazey wagging his head in the court-yard, with his fellow-profligates, the dogs, keeping time to him with their tails. The last words she heard, were the words in which the veteran paid his farewell tribute to her charms:—

“Burglary, or no burglary,” said old Mazey, “she’s a fine-grown girl, if ever there was a fine one yet. What a pity! what a pity!”

BETWEEN THE SCENES.



PROGRESS OF THE STORY THROUGH THE
POST.

BETWEEN THE SCENES.



I.

FROM GEORGE BARTRAM TO ADMIRAL BARTRAM.

“London, April 3rd, 1848.

“MY DEAR UNCLE,

“One hasty line, to inform you of a temporary obstacle which we neither of us anticipated when we took leave of each other at St. Crux. While I was wasting the last days of the week at the Grange, the Tyrrels must have been making their arrangements for leaving London. I have just come from Portland Place. The house is shut up; and the family (Miss Vanstone, of course, inciuded) left England yesterday, to pass the season in Paris.

“Pray don't let yourself be annoyed by this little check at starting. It is of no serious importance whatever. I have got the address at which the Tyrrels are living; and I mean to cross the Channel, after them, by the mail to-night. I shall find my opportunity in

Paris, just as soon as I could have found it in London. The grass shall not grow under my feet, I promise you. For once in my life, I will take Time as fiercely by the forelock, as if I was the most impetuous man in England—and, rely on it, the moment I know the result, you shall know the result too.

“Affectionately yours,

“GEORGE BARTRAM.”

II.

FROM GEORGE BARTRAM TO MISS GARTH.

“Paris, April 13th.

“DEAR MISS GARTH,

“I have just written, with a heavy heart, to my uncle ; and I think I owe it to your kind interest in me, not to omit writing next to you.

“You will feel for my disappointment, I am sure, when I tell you, in the fewest and plainest words, that Miss Vanstone has refused me.

“My vanity may have grievously misled me ; but I confess I expected a very different result. My vanity may be misleading me still—for I must acknowledge to you privately, that I think Miss Vanstone was sorry to refuse me. The reason she gave for her decision—no doubt a sufficient reason in her estimation—did not at the time, and does not now, seem sufficient to *me*. She spoke in the sweetest and kindest manner ; but she firmly declared that ‘her family misfortunes’ left her

no honourable alternative, but to think of my own interests, as I had not thought of them myself—and gratefully to decline accepting my offer.

“She was so painfully agitated that I could not venture to plead my own cause, as I might otherwise have pleaded it. At the first attempt I made to touch the personal question, she entreated me to spare her, and abruptly left the room. I am still ignorant whether I am to interpret the ‘family misfortunes’ which have set up this barrier between us, as meaning the misfortune for which her parents alone are to blame—or the misfortune of her having such a woman as Mrs. Noel Vanstone for her sister. In whichever of these circumstances the obstacle lies, it is no obstacle in my estimation. Can nothing remove it? Is there no hope? Forgive me for asking these questions. I cannot bear up against my bitter disappointment. Neither she, nor you, nor any one but myself, can know how I love her.

“Ever most truly yours,

“GEORGE BARTRAM.

“P.S.—I shall leave for England in a day or two, passing through London, on my way to St. Crux. There are family reasons, connected with the hateful subject of money, which make me look forward, with anything but pleasure, to my next interview with my uncle. If you address your letter to Long’s Hotel, it will be sure to reach me.”

III.

FROM MISS GARTH TO GEORGE BARTRAM.

“Westmoreland House, April 16th.

“DEAR MR. BARTRAM,

“You only did me justice in supposing that your letter would distress me. If you had supposed that it would make me excessively angry as well, you would not have been far wrong. I have no patience with the pride and perversity of the young women of the present day.

“I have heard from Norah. It is a long letter, stating the particulars in full detail. I am now going to put all the confidence in your honour and your discretion which I really feel. For your sake, and for Norah’s, I am going to let you know what the scruple really is, which has misled her into the pride and folly of refusing you. I am old enough to speak out; and I can tell you, if she had only been wise enough to let her own wishes guide her, she would have said, Yes—and gladly too.

“The original cause of all the mischief, is no less a person than your worthy uncle—Admiral Bartram.

“It seems that the admiral took it into his head (I suppose during your absence) to go to London by himself; and to satisfy some curiosity of his own about Norah, by calling in Portland Place, under pretence of renewing his old friendship with the Tyrrels. He came at luncheon-time, and saw Norah; and, from all I can hear, was apparently better pleased with her than he

expected or wished to be when he came into the house.

“So far, this is mere guess-work—but it is unluckily certain that he and Mrs. Tyrrel had some talk together alone, when luncheon was over. Your name was not mentioned; but when their conversation fell on Norah, you were in both their minds, of course. The admiral (doing her full justice personally) declared himself smitten with pity for her hard lot in life. The scandalous conduct of her sister must always stand (he feared) in the way of her future advantage. Who could marry her, without first making it a condition that she and her sister were to be absolute strangers to each other? And even then, the objection would remain—the serious objection to the husband’s family—of being connected by marriage with such a woman as Mrs. Noel Vanstone. It was very sad; it was not the poor girl’s fault—but it was none the less true that her sister was her rock ahead in life. So he ran on, with no real ill-feeling towards Norah, but with an obstinate belief in his own prejudices, which bore the aspect of ill-feeling, and which people with more temper than judgment would be but too readily disposed to resent accordingly.

“Unfortunately, Mrs. Tyrrel is one of those people. She is an excellent, warm-hearted woman, with a quick temper and very little judgment; strongly attached to Norah, and heartily interested in Norah’s welfare. From all I can learn, she first resented the expression of the admiral’s opinion, in his pre-

sence, as worldly and selfish in the last degree; and then interpreted it behind his back, as a hint to discourage his nephew's visits, which was a downright insult offered to a lady in her own house. This was foolish enough so far—but worse folly was to come.

“As soon as your uncle was gone, Mrs. Tyrrel, most unwisely and improperly, sent for Norah; and repeating the conversation that had taken place, warned her of the reception she might expect from the man who stood towards you in the position of a father, if she accepted an offer of marriage on your part. When I tell you that Norah's faithful attachment to her sister still remains unshaken, and that there lies hidden under her noble submission to the unhappy circumstances of her life, a proud susceptibility to slights of all kinds, which is deeply seated in her nature—you will understand the true motive of the refusal which has so naturally and so justly disappointed you. They are all three equally to blame in this matter. Your uncle was wrong to state his objections so roundly and inconsiderately as he did. Mrs. Tyrrel was wrong to let her temper get the better of her, and to suppose herself insulted where no insult was intended. And Norah was wrong to place a scruple of pride, and a hopeless belief in her sister which no strangers can be expected to share, above the higher claims of an attachment which might have secured the happiness and the prosperity of her future life.

“But the mischief has been done. The next question is—can the harm be remedied ?

“I hope and believe it can. My advice is this :—Don’t take No for an answer. Give her time enough to reflect on what she has done, and to regret it (as I believe she will regret it) in secret—trust to my influence over her to plead your cause for you at every opportunity I can find—wait patiently for the right moment—and ask her again. Men, being accustomed to act on reflection themselves, are a great deal too apt to believe that women act on reflection too. Women do nothing of the sort. They act on impulse—and, in nine cases out of ten, they are heartily sorry for it afterwards.

“In the mean while, you must help your own interests, by inducing your uncle to alter his opinion—or at least to make the concession of keeping his opinion to himself. Mrs. Tyrrel has rushed to the conclusion, that the harm he has done, he did intentionally—which is as much as to say, in so many words, that he had a prophetic conviction, when he came into the house, of what she would do when he left it. My explanation of the matter is a much simpler one. I believe that the knowledge of your attachment naturally roused his curiosity to see the object of it, and that Mrs. Tyrrel’s injudicious praises of Norah irritated his objections into openly declaring themselves. Any way, your course lies equally plain before you. Use your influence over your uncle to persuade him into setting matters right again;

trust my settled resolution to see Norah your wife, before six months more are over our heads; and believe me, your friend and well-wisher,

“HARRIET GARTH.”

IV.

FROM MRS. DRAKE TO GEORGE BARTRAM.

“St. Crux, April 17th.

“SIR,

“I direct these lines to the hotel you usually stay at in London; hoping that you may return soon enough from foreign parts to receive my letter without delay.

“I am sorry to say that some unpleasant events have taken place at St. Crux, since you left it, and that my honoured master, the admiral, is far from enjoying his usual good health. On both these accounts, I venture to write to you, on my own responsibility—for I think your presence is needed in the house.

“Early in the month, a most regrettable circumstance took place. Our new parlour maid was discovered by Mr. Mazey, at a late hour of the night (with her master’s basket of keys in her possession), prying into the private documents kept in the east library. The girl removed herself from the house, the next morning, before we were any of us astir, and she has not been heard of since. This event has annoyed and alarmed my master very seriously; and to make matters worse,

on the day when the girl's treacherous conduct was discovered, the admiral was seized with the first symptoms of a severe inflammatory cold. He was not himself aware, nor was any one else, how he had caught the chill. The doctor was sent for, and kept the inflammation down until the day before yesterday—when it broke out again, under circumstances which I am sure you will be sorry to hear, as I am truly sorry to write of them.

“On the date I have just mentioned—I mean the fifteenth of the month—my master himself informed me that he had been dreadfully disappointed by a letter received from you, which had come in the morning from foreign parts, and had brought him bad news. He did not tell me what the news was—but I have never, in all the years I have passed in the admiral's service, seen him so distressingly upset, and so unlike himself, as he was on that day. At night his uneasiness seemed to increase. He was in such a state of irritation, that he could not bear the sound of Mr. Mazey's hard breathing outside his door; and he laid his positive orders on the old man to go into one of the bedrooms for that night. Mr. Mazey, to his own great regret, was of course obliged to obey.

“Our only means of preventing the admiral from leaving his room in his sleep, if the fit unfortunately took him, being now removed, Mr. Mazey and I agreed to keep watch by turns through the night—sitting with the door ajar, in one of the empty rooms near our master's bed-chamber. We could think of nothing

better to do than this—knowing he would not allow us to lock him in; and not having the door-key in our possession, even if we could have ventured to secure him in his room without his permission. I kept watch for the first two hours, and then Mr. Mazey took my place. After having been some little time in my own room, it occurred to me that the old man was hard of hearing, and that if his eyes grew at all heavy in the night, his ears were not to be trusted to warn him, if anything happened. I slipped on my clothes again, and went back to Mr. Mazey. He was neither asleep nor awake—he was between the two. My mind misgave me, and I went on to the admiral's room. The door was open, and the bed was empty.

“Mr. Mazey and I went down stairs instantly. We looked in all the north rooms, one after another, and found no traces of him. I thought of the drawing-room next, and, being the most active of the two, went first to examine it. The moment I turned the sharp corner of the passage, I saw my master coming towards me through the open drawing-room door, asleep and dreaming, with his keys in his hands. The sliding-door behind him was open also; and the fear came to me then, and has remained with me ever since, that his dream had led him through the Banqueting Hall, into the east rooms. We abstained from waking him, and followed his steps, until he returned of his own accord to his bed-chamber. The next morning, I grieve to say, all the bad symptoms came back; and none of the remedies employed have succeeded in getting the

better of them yet. By the doctor's advice, we refrained from telling the admiral what had happened. He is still under the impression that he passed the night as usual in his own room.

"I have been careful to enter into all the particulars of this unfortunate accident, because neither Mr. Mazey nor myself desire to screen ourselves from blame, if blame we have deserved. We both acted for the best, and we both beg and pray you will consider our responsible situation, and come as soon as possible to St. Crux. Our honoured master is very hard to manage; and the doctor thinks, as we do, that your presence is wanted in the house.

"I remain, sir, with Mr. Mazey's respects and my own, your humble servant,

"SOPHIA DRAKE."

V.

FROM GEORGE BARTRAM TO MISS GARTH.

"St. Crux, April 22nd.

"DEAR MISS GARTH,

"Pray excuse my not thanking you sooner for your kind and consoling letter. We are in sad trouble at St. Crux. Any little irritation I might have felt at my poor uncle's unlucky interference in Portland Place, is all forgotten in the misfortune of his serious illness. He is suffering from internal inflammation, produced by cold; and symptoms have shown themselves which are

dangerous at his age. A physician from London is now in the house. You shall hear more in a few days. Meantime, believe me, with sincere gratitude,

“Yours most truly,

“GEORGE BARTRAM.”

VI.

FROM MR. LOSCOMBE TO MRS. NOEL VANSTONE.

“Lincoln’s Inn Fields, May 6th.

“DEAR MADAM,

“I have unexpectedly received some information which is of the most vital importance to your interests. The news of Admiral Bartram’s death has reached me this morning. He expired at his own house, on the fourth of the present month.

“This event at once disposes of the considerations which I had previously endeavoured to impress on you, in relation to your discovery at St. Crux. The wisest course we can now follow, is to open communications at once with the executors of the deceased gentleman; addressing them through the medium of the admiral’s legal adviser, in the first instance.

“I have despatched a letter this day to the solicitor in question. It simply warns him that we have lately become aware of the existence of a private Document, controlling the deceased gentleman in his use of the legacy devised to him by Mr. Noel Vanstone’s will. My letter assumes that the document will be easily

found among the admiral's papers ; and it mentions that I am the solicitor appointed by Mrs. Noel Vanstone to receive communications on her behalf. My object in taking this step, is to cause a search to be instituted for the Trust—in the very probable event of the executors not having met with it yet—before the usual measures are adopted for the administration of the admiral's estate. We will threaten legal proceedings, if we find that the object does not succeed. But I anticipate no such necessity. Admiral Bartram's executors must be men of high standing and position ; and they will do justice to you and to themselves in this matter, by looking for the Trust.

“Under these circumstances, you will naturally ask —‘What are our prospects when the document is found?’ Our prospects have a bright side, and a dark side. Let us take the bright side to begin with.

“What do we actually know ?

“We know, first, that the Trust does really exist. Secondly, that there is a provision in it, relating to the marriage of Mr. George Bartram in a given time. Thirdly, that the time (six months from the date of your husband's death) expired on the third of this month. Fourthly, that Mr. George Bartram (as I have found out by inquiry, in the absence of any positive information on the subject possessed by yourself) is, at the present moment, a single man. The conclusion naturally follows, that the object contemplated by the Trust, in this case, is an object that has failed.

“If no other provisions have been inserted in the document—or if, being inserted, those other provisions should be discovered to have failed also—I believe it to be impossible (especially if evidence can be found that the admiral himself considered the Trust binding on him) for the executors to deal with your husband’s fortune as legally forming part of Admiral Bartram’s estate. The legacy is expressly declared to have been left to him, on the understanding that he applies it to certain stated objects—and those objects have failed. What is to be done with the money? It was not left to the admiral himself, on the testator’s own showing; and the purposes for which it *was* left, have not been, and cannot be, carried out. I believe (if the case here supposed really happens), that the money must revert to the testator’s estate. In that event, the Law, dealing with it as a matter of necessity, divides it into two equal portions. One half goes to Mr. Noel Vanstone’s childless widow; and the other half is divided among Mr. Noel Vanstone’s next-of-kin.

“You will no doubt discover the obvious objection to the case in our favour, as I have here put it. You will see that it depends for its practical realization, not on one contingency, but on a series of contingencies, which must all happen exactly as we wish them to happen. I admit the force of the objection—but I can tell you at the same time, that these said contingencies are by no means so improbable as they may look on the face of them.

“We have every reason to believe that the Trust,

like the Will, was *not* drawn by a lawyer. That is one circumstance in our favour—that is enough of itself to cast a doubt on the soundness of all, or any, of the remaining provisions which we may not be acquainted with. Another chance which we may count on, is to be found, as I think, in that strange handwriting, placed under the signature on the third page of the Letter, which you saw, but which you unhappily omitted to read. All the probabilities point to those lines as written by Admiral Bartram; and the position which they occupy is certainly consistent with the theory that they touch the important subject of his own sense of obligation under the Trust.

“I wish to raise no false hopes in your mind. I only desire to satisfy you that we have a case worth trying.

“As for the dark side of the prospect, I need not enlarge on it. After what I have already written, you will understand that the existence of a sound provision, unknown to us, in the Trust, which has been properly carried out by the admiral—or which can be properly carried out by his representatives—would be necessarily fatal to our hopes. The legacy would be, in this case, devoted to the purpose or purposes contemplated by your husband—and, from that moment, you would have no claim.

“I have only to add, that as soon as I hear from the late admiral’s man of business, you shall know the result.

“Believe me, dear madam,

“Faithfully yours,

“JOHN LOSCOMBE.”

VII.

FROM GEORGE BARTRAM TO MISS GARTH.

"St. Crux, May 15th.

"DEAR MISS GARTH,

"I trouble you with another letter : partly to thank you for your kind expression of sympathy with me, under the loss that I have sustained ; and partly to tell you of an extraordinary application made to my uncle's executors, in which you and Miss Vanstone may both feel interested, as Mrs. Noel Vanstone is directly concerned in it.

"Knowing my own ignorance of legal technicalities, I enclose a copy of the application, instead of trying to describe it. You will notice, as suspicious, that no explanation is given of the manner in which the alleged discovery of one of my uncle's secrets was made, by persons who are total strangers to him.

"On being made acquainted with the circumstances, the executors at once applied to me. I could give them no positive information—for my uncle never consulted me on matters of business. But I felt in honour bound to tell them, that during the last six months of his life, the admiral had occasionally let fall expressions of impatience in my hearing, which led to the conclusion that he was annoyed by a private responsibility of some kind. I also mentioned that he had imposed a very strange condition on me—a condition which, in spite of his own assurances to the contrary, I was persuaded could not have emanated

from himself—of marrying within a given time (which time has now expired), or of not receiving from him a certain sum of money, which I believed to be the same in amount as the sum bequeathed to him in my cousin's will. The executors agreed with me that these circumstances gave a colour of probability to an otherwise incredible story ; and they decided that a search should be instituted for the Secret Trust—nothing in the slightest degree resembling this same Trust having been discovered, up to that time, among the admiral's papers.

“The search (no trifle in such a house as this) has now been in full progress for a week. It is superintended by both the executors, and by my uncle's lawyer—who is personally, as well as professionally, known to Mr. Loscombe (Mrs. Noel Vanstone's solicitor), and who has been included in the proceedings at the express request of Mr. Loscombe himself. Up to this time, nothing whatever has been found. Thousands and thousands of letters have been examined—and not one of them bears the remotest resemblance to the letter we are looking for.

“Another week will bring the search to an end. It is only at my express request that it will be persevered with so long. But as the admiral's generosity has made me sole heir to everything he possessed, I feel bound to do the fullest justice to the interests of others, however hostile to myself those interests may be.

“With this view, I have not hesitated to reveal to the lawyer, a constitutional peculiarity of my poor

uncle's, which was always kept a secret among us at his own request—I mean his tendency to somnambulism. I mentioned that he had been discovered (by the housekeeper and his old servant), walking in his sleep, about three weeks before his death, and that the part of the house in which he had been seen, and the basket of keys which he was carrying in his hand, suggested the inference that he had come from one of the rooms in the east wing, and that he might have opened some of the pieces of furniture in one of them. I surprised the lawyer (who seemed to be quite ignorant of the extraordinary actions constantly performed by somnambulists), by informing him that my uncle could find his way about the house, lock and unlock doors, and remove objects of all kinds from one place to another, as easily in his sleep, as in his waking hours. And I declared that, while I felt the faintest doubt in my own mind whether he might not have been dreaming of the Trust on the night in question, and putting the dream in action in his sleep, I should not feel satisfied unless the rooms in the east wing were searched again.

“It is only right to add that there is not the least foundation in fact for this idea of mine. During the latter part of his fatal illness, my poor uncle was quite incapable of speaking on any subject whatever. From the time of my arrival at St. Crux, in the middle of last month, to the time of his death, not a word dropped from him which referred in the remotest way to the Secret Trust.

“Here then, for the present, the matter rests. If you think it right to communicate the contents of this letter to Miss Vanstone, pray tell her that it will not be my fault if her sister’s assertion (however preposterous it may seem to my uncle’s executors) is not fairly put to the proof.

“Believe me, dear Miss Garth,

“Always truly yours,

“GEORGE BARTRAM.

“P.S.—As soon as all business matters are settled, I am going abroad for some months, to try the relief of change of scene. The house will be shut up, and left under the charge of Mrs. Drake. I have not forgotten your once telling me that you should like to see St. Crux, if you ever found yourself in this neighbourhood. If you are at all likely to be in Essex, during the time when I am abroad, I have provided against the chance of your being disappointed, by leaving instructions with Mrs. Drake to give you, and any friends of yours, the freest admission to the house and grounds.”

VIII.

FROM MR. LOSCOMBE TO MRS. NOEL VANSTONE.

“Lincoln’s Inn Fields, May 24th.

“DEAR MADAM,

“After a whole fortnight’s search—conducted, I am bound to admit, with the most conscientious and

unrelaxing care—no such document as the Secret Trust has been found among the papers left at St. Crux by the late Admiral Bartram.

“Under these circumstances, the executors have decided on acting under the only recognizable authority which they have to guide them—the admiral’s own will. This document (executed some years since) bequeaths the whole of his estate, both real and personal (that is to say, all the lands he possesses, and all the money he possesses, at the time of his death), to his nephew. The will is plain, and the result is inevitable. Your husband’s fortune is lost to you from this moment. Mr. George Bartram legally inherits it, as he legally inherits the house and estate of St. Crux.

“I make no comment upon this extraordinary close to the proceedings. The Trust may have been destroyed, or the Trust may be hidden in some place of concealment, inaccessible to discovery. Either way, it is, in my opinion, impossible to found any valid legal declaration on a knowledge of the document, so fragmentary and so incomplete, as the knowledge which you possess. If other lawyers differ from me on this point, by all means consult them. I have devoted money enough and time enough to the unfortunate attempt to assert your interests; and my connection with the matter, must, from this moment, be considered at an end.

“Your obedient servant,

“JOHN LOSCOMBE.”

IX.

FROM MRS. RUDDOCK (LODGING-HOUSE KEEPER)
TO MR. LOSCOMBE.

“Park Terrace, St. John’s Wood,
“June 2nd.

“SIR,

“Having, by Mrs. Noel Vanstone’s directions, taken letters for her to the post, addressed to you—and knowing no one else to apply to—I beg to inquire whether you are acquainted with any of her friends; for I think it right that they should be stirred up to take some steps about her.

“Mrs. Vanstone first came to me in November last, when she and her maid occupied my apartments. On that occasion, and again on this, she has given me no cause to complain of her. She has behaved like a lady, and paid me my due. I am writing, as a mother of a family, under a sense of responsibility—I am not writing with an interested motive.

“After proper warning given, Mrs. Vanstone (who is now quite alone) leaves me to-morrow. She has not concealed from me that her circumstances are fallen very low, and that she cannot afford to remain in my house. This is all she has told me—I know nothing of where she is going, or what she means to do next. But I have every reason to believe she desires to destroy all traces by which she might be found, after leaving this place—for I discovered her in tears yesterday, burning letters which were doubtless letters from her

friends. In looks and conduct she has altered most shockingly in the last week. I believe there is some dreadful trouble on her mind—and I am afraid, from what I see of her, that she is on the eve of a serious illness. It is very sad to see such a young woman, so utterly deserted and friendless as she is now.

“Excuse my troubling you with this letter; it is on my conscience to write it. If you know any of her relations, please warn them that time is not to be wasted. If they lose to-morrow, they may lose the last chance of finding her.

“Your humble servant,

“CATHERINE RUDDOCK.”

X.

FROM MR. LOSCOMBE TO MRS. RUDDOCK.

“Lincoln’s Inn Fields, June 2nd.

“MADAM,

“My only connection with Mrs. Noel Vanstone was a professional one—and that connection is now at an end. I am not acquainted with any of her friends; and I cannot undertake to interfere personally, either with her present or future proceedings.

“Regretting my inability to afford you any assistance, I remain, your obedient servant.

“JOHN LOSCOMBE.”

THE LAST SCENE.



AARON'S BUILDINGS.

THE LAST SCENE.

CHAPTER I.

ON the seventh of June, the owners of the merchantman, *DELIVERANCE*, received news that the ship had touched at Plymouth to land passengers, and had then continued her homeward voyage to the Port of London. Five days later, the vessel was in the river, and was towed into the East India Docks.

Having transacted the business on shore for which he was personally responsible, Captain Kirke made the necessary arrangements by letter, for visiting his brother-in-law's parsonage in Suffolk, on the seventeenth of the month. As usual, in such cases, he received a list of commissions to execute for his sister on the day before he left London. One of these commissions took him into the neighbourhood of Camden Town. He drove to his destination from the Docks ; and then, dismissing the vehicle, set forth to walk back southward, towards the New Road.

He was not well acquainted with the district ; and

his attention wandered, farther and farther away from the scene around him, as he went on. His thoughts, roused by the prospect of seeing his sister again, had led his memory back to the night when he had parted from her, leaving the house on foot. The spell so strangely laid on him, in that past time, had kept its hold through all after-events. The face that had haunted him on the lonely road, had haunted him again on the lonely sea. The woman who had followed him, as in a dream, to his sister's door, had followed him—thought of his thought, and spirit of his spirit—to the deck of his ship. Through storm and calm on the voyage out, through storm and calm on the voyage home, she had been with him. In the ceaseless turmoil of the London streets, she was with him now. He knew what the first question on his lips would be, when he had seen his sister and her boys. "I shall try to talk of something else," he thought; "but when Lizzie and I are alone, it will come out in spite of me."

The necessity of waiting to let a string of carts pass at a turning, before he crossed, awakened him to present things. He looked about in a momentary confusion. The street was strange to him; he had lost his way.

The first foot-passenger of whom he inquired, appeared to have no time to waste in giving information. Hurriedly directing him to cross to the other side of the road, to turn down the first street he came to on his right hand, and then to ask again, the

stranger unceremoniously hastened on without waiting to be thanked.

Kirke followed his directions, and took the turning on his right. The street was short and narrow, and the houses on either side were of the poorer order. He looked up as he passed the corner, to see what the name of the place might be. It was called "Aaron's Buildings."

Low down on the side of the "Buildings" along which he was walking, a little crowd of idlers was assembled round two cabs, both drawn up before the door of the same house. Kirke advanced to the crowd, to ask his way of any civil stranger among them, who might *not* be in a hurry this time. On approaching the cabs, he found a woman disputing with the drivers ; and heard enough to inform him that two vehicles had been sent for by mistake, where one only was wanted.

The house-door was open ; and when he turned that way next, he looked easily into the passage, over the heads of the people in front of him.

The sight that met his eyes should have been shielded in pity from the observation of the street. He saw a slatternly girl, with a frightened face, standing by an old chair placed in the middle of the passage, and holding a woman on the chair, too weak and helpless to support herself—a woman apparently in the last stage of illness, who was about to be removed, when the dispute outside was ended, in one of the cabs. Her head was drooping, when he first saw her, and an old

shawl which covered it, had fallen forward so as to hide the upper part of her face.

Before he could look away again, the girl in charge of her, raised her head, and restored the shawl to its place. The action disclosed her face to view, for an instant only, before her head drooped once more on her bosom. In that instant, he saw the woman whose beauty was the haunting remembrance of his life—whose image had been vivid in his mind, not five minutes since.

The shock of the double recognition—the recognition, at the same moment, of the face, and of the dreadful change in it—struck him speechless and helpless. The steady presence of mind in all emergencies which had become a habit of his life, failed him for the first time. The poverty-stricken street, the squalid mob round the door, swam before his eyes. He staggered back, and caught at the iron-railings of the house behind him.

“Where are they taking her to?” he heard a woman ask, close at his side.

“To the hospital, if they will have her,” was the reply. “And to the workhouse, if they won’t.”

That horrible answer roused him. He pushed his way through the crowd, and entered the house.

The misunderstanding on the pavement had been set right; and one of the cabs had driven off. As he crossed the threshold of the door, he confronted the people of the house at the moment when they were moving her. The cabman who had remained, was on

one side of the chair, and the woman who had been disputing with the two drivers was on the other. They were just lifting her, when Kirke's tall figure darkened the door.

"What are you doing with that lady?" he asked.

The cabman looked up with the insolence of his reply visible in his eyes, before his lips could utter it. But the woman, quicker than he, saw the suppressed agitation in Kirke's face, and dropped her hold of the chair in an instant.

"Do you know her, sir?" asked the woman, eagerly. "Are you one of her friends?"

"Yes," said Kirke, without hesitation.

"It's not my fault, sir," pleaded the woman, shrinking under the look he fixed on her. "I would have waited patiently till her friends found her—I would indeed!"

Kirke made no reply. He turned, and spoke to the cabman.

"Go out," he said, "and close the door after you. I'll send you down your money directly. What room in the house did you take her from, when you brought her here?" he resumed, addressing himself to the woman again.

"The first floor back, sir."

"Show me the way to it."

He stooped, and lifted Magdalen in his arms. Her head rested gently on the sailor's breast; her eyes looked up wonderingly into the sailor's face. She smiled and whispered to him vacantly. Her mind had

wandered back to old days at home ; and her few broken words showed that she fancied herself a child again in her father's arms. "Poor papa !" she said softly. "Why do you look so sorry? Poor papa !"

The woman led the way into the back room on the first floor. It was very small ; it was miserably furnished. But the little bed was clean, and the few things in the room were neatly kept. Kirke laid her tenderly on the bed. She caught one of his hands in her burning fingers. "Don't distress mamma about me," she said. "Send for Norah." Kirke tried gently to release his hand ; but she only clasped it the more eagerly. He sat down by the bedside to wait until it pleased her to release him. The woman stood looking at them and crying, in a corner of the room. Kirke observed her attentively. "Speak," he said, after an interval, in low quiet tones. "Speak, in *her* presence ; and tell me the truth."

With many words, with many tears, the woman spoke.

She had let her first floor to the lady, a fortnight since. The lady had paid a week's rent, and had given the name of Gray. She had been out from morning till night, for the first three days, and had come home again, on every occasion, with a wretchedly weary, disappointed look. The woman of the house had suspected that she was in hiding from her friends, under a false name ; and that she had been vainly trying to raise money, or to get some employment, on the three days when she was out for so long, and when

she looked so disappointed on coming home. However that might be, on the fourth day she had fallen ill, with shivering fits and hot fits, turn and turn about. On the fifth day, she was worse ; and on the sixth, she was too sleepy at one time, and too light-headed at another, to be spoken to. The chemist (who did the doctoring in those parts) had come and looked at her, and had said he thought it was a bad fever. He had left a “saline draught,” which the woman of the house had paid for out of her own pocket, and had administered without effect. She had ventured on searching the only box which the lady had brought with her ; and had found nothing in it but a few necessary articles of linen—no dresses, no ornaments, not so much as the fragment of a letter which might help in discovering her friends. Between the risk of keeping her under these circumstances, and the barbarity of turning a sick woman into the street, the landlady herself had not hesitated. She would willingly have kept her tenant, on the chance of the lady’s recovery, and on the chance of friends turning up. But not half an hour since, her husband—who never came near the house, except to take her money—had come to rob her of her little earnings, as usual. She had been obliged to tell him that no rent was in hand for the first floor, and that none was likely to be in hand until the lady recovered, or her friends found her. On hearing this, he had mercilessly insisted—well or ill—that the lady should go. There was the hospital to take her to ; and if the hospital shut its

doors, there was the workhouse to try next. If she was not out of the place in an hour's time, he threatened to come back, and take her out himself. His wife knew, but too well, that he was brute enough to be as good as his word; and no other choice had been left her, but to do as she had done, for the sake of the lady herself.

The woman told her shocking story, with every appearance of being honestly ashamed of it. Towards the end, Kirke felt the clasp of the burning fingers slackening round his hand. He looked back at the bed again. Her weary eyes were closing; and, with her face still turned towards the sailor, she was sinking into sleep.

"Is there any one in the front room?" said Kirke, in a whisper. "Come in there; I have something to say to you."

The woman followed him, through the door of communication between the rooms.

"How much does she owe you?" he asked.

The landlady mentioned the sum. Kirke put it down before her on the table.

"Where is your husband?" was his next question.

"Waiting at the public-house, sir, till the hour is up."

"You can take him the money, or not, as you think right," said Kirke quietly. "I have only one thing to tell you, so far as your husband is concerned. If you want to see every bone in his skin broken, let him come to the house while I am in it. Stop! I have

something more to say. Do you know of any doctor in the neighbourhood, who can be depended on?"

"Not in our neighbourhood, sir. But I know of one within half an hour's walk of us."

"Take the cab at the door; and, if you find him at home, bring him back in it. Say I am waiting here for his opinion, on a very serious case. He shall be well paid, and you shall be well paid. Make haste!"

The woman left the room.

Kirke sat down alone, to wait for her return. He hid his face in his hands; and tried to realize the strange and touching situation in which the accident of a moment had placed him.

Hidden in the squalid by-ways of London, under a false name; cast, friendless and helpless, on the mercy of strangers, by illness which had struck her prostrate, mind and body alike—so he met her again, the woman who had opened a new world of beauty to his mind; the woman who had called Love to life in him by a look! What horrible misfortune had struck her so cruelly, and struck her so low? What mysterious destiny had guided him to the last refuge of her poverty and despair, in the hour of her sorest need? "If it is ordered that I am to see her again, I *shall* see her." Those words came back to him now—the memorable words that he had spoken to his sister at parting. With that thought in his heart, he had gone where his duty called him. Months and months had passed; thousands and thousands of miles, protracting their desolate length on the

unresting waters, had rolled between them. And through the lapse of time, and over the waste of oceans—day after day, and night after night, as the winds of heaven blew, and the good ship toiled on before them—he had advanced, nearer and nearer to the end that was waiting for him; he had journeyed blindfold to the meeting on the threshold of that miserable door. “What has brought me here?” he said to himself in a whisper. “The mercy of chance? No! The mercy of God.”

He waited, unregardful of the place, unconscious of the time, until the sound of footsteps on the stairs came suddenly between him and his thoughts. The door opened, and the doctor was shown into the room.

“Dr. Merrick,” said the landlady, placing a chair for him.

“*Mr.* Merrick,” said the visitor, smiling quietly as he took the chair. “I am not a physician—I am a surgeon in general practice.”

Physician or surgeon, there was something in his face and manner which told Kirke, at a glance, that he was a man to be relied on.

After a few preliminary words on either side, Mr. Merrick sent the landlady into the bedroom to see if his patient was awake or asleep. The woman returned, and said she was “betwixt the two, light in the head again, and burning hot.” The doctor went at once into the bedroom, telling the landlady to follow him, and to close the door behind her.

A weary time passed before he came back into the

front room. When he reappeared, his face spoke for him, before any question could be asked.

"Is it a serious illness?" said Kirke, his voice sinking low, his eyes anxiously fixed on the doctor's face.

"It is a *dangerous* illness," said Mr. Merrick, with an emphasis on the word.

He drew his chair nearer to Kirke, and looked at him attentively.

"May I ask you some questions, which are not strictly medical?" he inquired.

Kirke bowed.

"Can you tell me what her life has been, before she came into this house, and before she fell ill?"

"I have no means of knowing. I have just returned to England, after a long absence."

"Did you know of her coming here?"

"I only discovered it by accident."

"Has she no female relations? No mother? no sister? no one to take care of her but yourself?"

"No one—unless I can succeed in tracing her relations. No one but myself."

Mr. Merrick was silent. He looked at Kirke more attentively than ever. "Strange!" thought the doctor. "He is here, in sole charge of her—and is this all he knows?"

Kirke saw the doubt in his face; and addressed himself straight to that doubt, before another word passed between them.

"I see my position here surprises you," he said simply. "Will you consider it the position of a

relation—the position of her brother or her father—until her friends can be found?” His voice faltered, and he laid his hand earnestly on the doctor’s arm. “I have taken this trust on myself,” he said : “and, as God shall judge me, I will not be unworthy of it !”

The poor weary head lay on his breast again, the poor fevered fingers clasped his hand once more, as he spoke those words.

“I believe you,” said the doctor warmly. “I believe you are an honest man.—Pardon me if I have seemed to intrude myself on your confidence. I respect your reserve—from this moment, it is sacred to me. In justice to both of us, let me say that the questions I have asked, were not prompted by mere curiosity. No common cause will account for the illness which has laid my patient on that bed. She has suffered some long-continued mental trial, some wearing and terrible suspense—and she has broken down under it. It might have helped me, if I could have known what the nature of the trial was, and how long or how short a time elapsed before she sank under it. In that hope, I spoke.”

“When you told me she was dangerously ill,” said Kirke, “did you mean danger to her reason, or to her life ?”

“To both,” replied Mr. Merrick. “Her whole nervous system has given way ; all the ordinary functions of her brain are in a state of collapse. I can give you no plainer explanation than that of the nature of the malady. The fever which frightens the people

of the house, is merely the effect. The cause is what I have told you. She may lie on that bed for weeks to come ; passing alternately, without a gleam of consciousness, from a state of delirium to a state of repose. You must not be alarmed if you find her sleep lasting far beyond the natural time. That sleep is a better remedy than any I can give, and nothing must disturb it. All our art can accomplish is to watch her—to help her with stimulants from time to time—and to wait for what Nature will do.”

“Must she remain here ? Is there no hope of our being able to move her to a better place ?”

“No hope whatever, for the present. She has already been disturbed, as I understand—and she is seriously the worse for it. Even if she gets better, even if she comes to herself again, it would still be a dangerous experiment to move her too soon—the least excitement or alarm would be fatal to her. You must make the best of this place as it is. The landlady has my directions ; and I will send a good nurse to help her. There is nothing more to be done. So far as her life can be said to be in any human hands, it is as much in your hands now, as in mine. Everything depends on the care that is taken of her, under your direction, in this house.” With those farewell words he rose, and quitted the room.

Left by himself, Kirke walked to the door of communication ; and knocking at it softly, told the landlady he wished to speak with her.

He was far more composed, far more like his own

resolute self, after his interview with the doctor, than he had been before it. A man living in the artificial social atmosphere which *this* man had never breathed, would have felt painfully the worldly side of the situation—its novelty and strangeness; the serious present difficulty in which it placed him; the numberless misinterpretations in the future, to which it might lead. Kirke never gave the situation a thought. He saw nothing but the duty it claimed from him—a duty which the doctor's farewell words had put plainly before his mind. Everything depended on the care taken of her, under his direction, in that house. There was his responsibility—and he unconsciously acted under it, exactly as he would have acted in a case of emergency with women and children, on board his own ship. He questioned the landlady in short, sharp sentences: the only change in him, was in the lowered tone of his voice, and in the anxious looks which he cast, from time to time, at the room where she lay.

“Do you understand what the doctor has told you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The house must be kept quiet. Who lives in the house?”

“Only me and my daughter, sir; we live in the parlours. Times have gone badly with us, since Lady Day. Both the rooms above this are to let.”

“I will take them both, and the two rooms down here as well. Do you know of any active trustworthy man, who can run on errands for me?”

“Yes, sir. Shall I go——?”

“No. Let your daughter go. You must not leave the house till the nurse comes. Don’t send the messenger up here. Men of that sort tread heavily—I’ll go down, and speak to him at the door.”

He went down when the messenger came, and sent him first to purchase pen, ink, and paper. The man’s next errand despatched him to make inquiries for a person who could provide for deadening the sound of passing wheels in the street, by laying down tan before the house in the usual way. This object accomplished, the messenger received two letters to post. The first was addressed to Kirke’s brother-in-law. It told him, in few, and plain words, what had happened; and left him to break the news to his wife, as he thought best. The second letter was directed to the landlord of the Aldborough Hotel. Magdalen’s assumed name at North Shingles, was the only name by which Kirke knew her; and the one chance of tracing her relatives that he could discern, was the chance of discovering her reputed uncle and aunt, by means of inquiries starting from Aldborough.

Towards the close of the afternoon, a decent middle-aged woman came to the house, with a letter from Mr. Merrick. She was well known to the doctor, as a trustworthy and careful person, who had nursed his own wife; and she would be assisted, from time to time, by a lady, who was a member of a religious Sisterhood in the district, and whose compassionate interest had been warmly aroused in the case. Towards

eight o'clock, that evening, the doctor himself would call, and see that his patient wanted for nothing.

The arrival of the nurse, and the relief of knowing that she was to be trusted, left Kirke free to think of himself. His luggage was ready packed for his contemplated journey to Suffolk, the next day. It was merely necessary to transport it from the hotel to the house in Aaron's Buildings.

He stopped once only on his way to the hotel, to look at a toy-shop in one of the great thoroughfares. The miniature ships in the window reminded him of his nephew. "My little namesake will be sadly disappointed at not seeing me to-morrow," he thought. "I must make it up to the boy, by sending him something from his uncle." He went into the shop, and bought one of the ships. It was secured in a box, and packed and directed in his presence. He put a card on the deck of the miniature vessel before the cover of the box was nailed on, bearing this inscription:—"A ship for the little sailor, with the big sailor's love."—"Children like to be written to, ma'am," he said, apologetically, to the woman behind the counter. "Send the box as soon as you can—I am anxious the boy should get it to-morrow."

Towards the dusk of the evening, he returned with his luggage to Aaron's Buildings. He took off his boots in the passage, and carried his trunk up-stairs himself; stopping, as he passed the first floor, to make his inquiries. Mr. Merrick was present to answer them.

“She was awake and wandering,” said the doctor, “a few minutes since. But we have succeeded in composing her, and she is sleeping now.”

“Have no words escaped her, sir, which might help us to find her friends?”

Mr. Merrick shook his head.

“Weeks and weeks may pass yet,” he said, “and that poor girl’s story may still be a sealed secret to all of us. We can only wait.”

So the day ended—the first of many days that were to come.

CHAPTER II.

THE warm sunlight of July shining softly through a green blind ; an open window with fresh flowers set on the sill ; a strange bed, in a strange room ; a giant figure of the female sex (like a dream of Mrs. Wragge) towering aloft on one side of the bed, and trying to clap its hands ; another woman (quickly) stopping the hands before they could make any noise ; a mild expostulating voice (like a dream of Mrs. Wragge again) breaking the silence in these words, "She knows me, ma'am, she knows me ; if I mustn't be happy, it will be the death of me !" — such were the first sights, such were the first sounds, to which, after six weeks of oblivion, Magdalen suddenly and strangely awoke.

After a little, the sights grew dim again, and the sounds sank into silence. Sleep, the merciful, took her once more, and hushed her back to repose.

Another day — and the sights were clearer, the sounds were louder. Another — and she heard a man's voice, through the door, asking for news from the sick-room. The voice was strange to her ; it was always cautiously lowered to the same quiet tone. It inquired after her, in the morning, when she woke — at noon,

when she took her refreshment—in the evening, before she dropped to sleep again. “Who is so anxious about me?” That was the first thought her mind was strong enough to form:—“Who is so anxious about me?”

More days—and she could speak to the nurse at her bedside; she could answer the questions of an elderly man, who knew far more about her than she knew about herself, and who told her he was Mr. Merrick, the doctor; she could sit up in bed, supported by pillows, wondering what had happened to her, and where she was; she could feel a growing curiosity about that quiet voice, which still asked after her, morning, noon, and night, on the other side of the door.

Another day’s delay—and Mr. Merrick asked her if she was strong enough to see an old friend. A meek voice, behind him, articulating high in the air, said, “It’s only me.” The voice was followed by the prodigious bodily apparition of Mrs. Wragge, with her cap all awry, and one of her shoes in the next room. “Oh, look at her! look at her!” cried Mrs. Wragge, in an ecstasy, dropping on her knees at Magdalen’s bedside, with a thump that shook the house. “Bless her heart, she’s well enough to laugh at me already. ‘Cheer, boys, cheer—!’ I beg your pardon, doctor, my conduct isn’t ladylike, I know. It’s my head, sir; it isn’t *me*. I must get vent somehow—or my head will burst!” No coherent sentence, in answer to any sort of question put to her, could be extracted that

morning from Mrs. Wragge. She rose from one climax of verbal confusion to another—and finished her visit under the bed, groping inscrutably for the second shoe.

The morrow came—and Mr. Merrick promised that she should see another old friend on the next day. In the evening, when the inquiring voice asked after her, as usual, and when the door was opened a few inches to give the reply, she answered faintly for herself:—"I am better, thank you." There was a moment of silence—and then, just as the door was shut again, the voice sank to a whisper, and said fervently, "Thank God!" Who was he? She had asked them all, and no one would tell her. Who was he?

The next day came; and she heard her door opened softly. Brisk footsteps tripped into the room; a lithe little figure advanced to the bed-side. Was it a dream again? No! There he was in his own evergreen reality, with the copious flow of language pouring smoothly from his lips; with the lambent dash of humour twinkling in his parti-coloured eyes—there he was, more audacious, more persuasive, more respectable than ever, in a suit of glossy black, with a speckless white cravat, and a rampant shirt-frill—the unblushing, the invincible, the unchangeable, Wragge!

"Not a word, my dear girl!" said the captain, seating himself comfortably at the bedside, in his old confidential way. "I am to do all the talking; and I think you will own, a more competent man for the purpose could not possibly have been found. I am really delighted—honestly delighted, if I may use such an

apparently inappropriate word—to see you again, and to see you getting well. I have often thought of you ; I have often missed you ; I have often said to myself—never mind what ! Clear the stage, and drop the curtain on the past. *Dum vivimus, vivamus !* Pardon the pedantry of a Latin quotation, my dear, and tell me how I look. Am I, or am I not, the picture of a prosperous man ?”

Magdalen attempted to answer him. The captain’s deluge of words flowed over her again in a moment.

“Don’t exert yourself,” he said. “I’ll put all your questions for you. What have I been about ? Why do I look so remarkably well off ? And how in the world did I find my way to this house ? My dear girl, I have been occupied, since we last saw each other, in slightly modifying my old professional habits. I have shifted from Moral Agriculture to Medical Agriculture. Formerly, I preyed on the public sympathy ; now, I prey on the public stomach. Stomach and sympathy, sympathy and stomach—look them both fairly in the face, when you reach the wrong side of fifty, and you will agree with me that they come to much the same thing. However that may be, here I am—incredible as it may appear—a man with an income, at last. The founders of my fortune are three in number. Their names are Aloes, Scammony, and Gamboge. In plainer words, I am now living—on a Pill. I made a little money (if you remember) by my friendly connection with you. I made a little more, by the happy decease (*Requiescat in Pace !*) of that female relative

of Mrs. Wragge's, from whom, as I told you, my wife had expectations. Very good. What do you think I did? I invested the whole of my capital, at one fell swoop, in advertisements—and purchased my drugs and my pill-boxes on credit. The result is now before you. Here I am, a Grand Financial Fact. Here I am with my clothes positively paid for; with a balance at my banker's; with my servant in livery, and my gig at the door; solvent, flourishing, popular—and all on a Pill."

Magdalen smiled. The captain's face assumed an expression of mock gravity: he looked as if there was a serious side to the question, and as if he meant to put it next.

"It's no laughing matter to the public, my dear," he said. "They can't get rid of me and my Pill—they must take us. There is not a single form of appeal in the whole range of human advertisement, which I am not making to the unfortunate public at this moment. Hire the last new novel—there I am, inside the boards of the book. Send for the last new Song—the instant you open the leaves, I drop out of it. Take a cab—I fly in at the window, in red. Buy a box of tooth-powder at the chemist's—I wrap it up for you, in blue. Show yourself at the theatre—I flutter down on you, in yellow. The mere titles of my advertisements are quite irresistible. Let me quote a few from last week's issue. Proverbial Title:—'A Pill in Time, saves Nine.' Familiar Title:—'Excuse me, how is your Stomach?' Patriotic Title:—'What are the

three characteristics of a true-born Englishman? His Hearth, his Home, and his Pill.' Title in the form of a nursery dialogue:—'Mamma, I am not well.' 'What is the matter, my pet?' 'I want a little Pill.' Title in the form of an Historical Anecdote:—'New Discovery in the Mine of English History. When the Princes were smothered in the Tower, their faithful attendant collected all the little possessions left behind them. Among the touching trifles dear to the poor boys, he found a tiny Box. It contained the Pill of the Period. Is it necessary to say, how inferior that Pill was to its modern Successor, which prince and peasant alike may now obtain'—*Et cætera, Et cætera.* The place in which my Pill is made, is an advertisement in itself. I have got one of the largest shops in London. Behind one counter (visible to the public through the lucid medium of plate-glass), are four-and-twenty young men, in white aprons, making the Pill. Behind another counter, are four-and-twenty young men, in white cravats, making the boxes. At the bottom of the shop are three elderly accountants, posting the vast financial transactions accruing from the Pill, in three enormous ledgers. Over the door are my name, portrait, and autograph, expanded to colossal proportions, and surrounded, in flowing letters, by the motto of the establishment:—'Down with the Doctors!' Even Mrs. Wragge contributes her quota to this prodigious enterprise. She is the celebrated woman whom I have cured of indescribable agonies from every complaint under the sun. Her portrait is

engraved on all the wrappers, with the following inscription beneath it:—‘Before she took the Pill, you might have blown this patient away with a feather. Look at her now!!!’ Last, not least, my dear girl, the Pill is the cause of my finding my way to this house. My department in the prodigious Enterprise already mentioned, is to scour the United Kingdom in a gig, establishing Agencies everywhere. While founding one of those Agencies, I heard of a certain friend of mine, who had lately landed in England, after a long sea voyage. I got his address in London—he was a lodger in this house. I called on him forthwith—and was stunned by the news of your illness. Such, in brief, is the history of my existing connection with British Medicine; and so it happens that you see me at the present moment, sitting in the present chair, now as ever, yours truly, Horatio Wragge.”

In these terms the captain brought his personal statement to a close. He looked more and more attentively at Magdalen, the nearer he got to the conclusion. Was there some latent importance attaching to his last words, which did not appear on the face of them? There was. His visit to the sick-room had a serious object; and that object he had now approached.

In describing the circumstances, under which he had become acquainted with Magdalen’s present position, Captain Wragge had skirted with his customary

dexterity round the remote boundaries of truth. Emboldened by the absence of any public scandal in connection with Noel Vanstone's marriage, or with the event of his death as announced in the newspaper obituary, the captain, roaming the eastern circuit, had ventured back to Aldborough, a fortnight since, to establish an agency there for the sale of his wonderful Pill. No one had recognized him but the landlady of the hotel, who at once insisted on his entering the house, and reading Kirke's letter to her husband. The same night, Captain Wragge was in London, and was closeted with the sailor, in the second-floor room at Aaron's Buildings.

The serious nature of the situation, the indisputable certainty that Kirke must fail in tracing Magdalen's friends, unless he first knew who she really was, had decided the captain on disclosing part, at least, of the truth. Declining to enter into any particulars—for family reasons, which Magdalen might explain on her recovery, if she pleased—he astounded Kirke by telling him that the friendless woman whom he had rescued, and whom he had only known, up to that moment, as Miss Bygrave—was no other than the youngest daughter of Andrew Vanstone. The disclosure, on Kirke's side, of his father's connection with the young officer in Canada, had followed naturally, on the revelation of Magdalen's real name. Captain Wragge had expressed his surprise, but had made no further remark at the time. A fortnight later, however, when the patient's recovery forced the serious

difficulty on the doctor, of meeting the questions which Magdalen was sure to ask, the captain's ingenuity had come, as usual, to the rescue.

"You can't tell her the truth," he said, "without awakening painful recollections of her stay at Aldborough, into which I am not at liberty to enter. Don't acknowledge, just yet, that Mr. Kirke only knew her as Miss Bygrave of North Shingles, when he found her in this house. Tell her boldly that he knew who she was, and that he felt (what she must feel) that he had an hereditary right to help and protect her as his father's son. I am, as I have already told you," continued the captain, sticking fast to his old assertion, "a distant relative of the Combe-Raven family; and, if there is nobody else at hand to help you through this difficulty, my services are freely at your disposal."

No one else was at hand; and the emergency was a serious one. Strangers undertaking the responsibility might ignorantly jar on past recollections, which it would, perhaps, be the death of her to revive too soon. Near relatives might, by their premature appearance at the bedside, produce the same deplorable result. The alternative lay between irritating and alarming her by leaving her inquiries unanswered—or trusting Captain Wragge. In the doctor's opinion, the second risk was the least serious risk of the two—and the captain was now seated at Magdalen's bedside in discharge of the trust confided to him.

Would she ask the question which it had been the

private object of all Captain Wragge's preliminary talk, lightly and pleasantly to provoke. Yes : as soon as his silence gave her the opportunity, she asked it :— Who was that friend of his living in the house ?

“ You ought by rights to know him as well as I do,” said the captain. “ He is the son of one of your father's old military friends—when your father was quartered with his regiment in Canada. Your cheeks mustn't flush up ! If they do I shall go away.”

She was astonished, but not agitated. Captain Wragge had begun by interesting her in the remote past, which she only knew by hearsay, before he ventured on the delicate ground of her own experience.

In a moment more, she advanced to her next question :—What was his name ?

“ Kirke,” proceeded the captain. “ Did you never hear of his father, Major Kirke—commanding officer of the regiment in Canada ? Did you never hear that the major helped your father through a great difficulty, like the best of good fellows and good friends ?”

Yes : she faintly fancied she had heard something about her father, and an officer who had once been very good to him when he was a young man. But she could not look back so long.—Was Mr. Kirke poor ?

Even Captain Wragge's penetration was puzzled by that question. He gave the true answer at hazard. “ No,” he said, “ not poor.”

Her next inquiry showed what she had been thinking of.—If Mr. Kirke was not poor, why did he come to live in that house ?

“She has caught me!” thought the captain. “There is only one way out of it—I must administer another dose of truth. Mr. Kirke discovered you here by chance,” he proceeded aloud; “very ill, and not nicely attended to. Somebody was wanted to take care of you, while you were not able to take care of yourself. Why not Mr. Kirke? He was the son of your father’s old friend—which is the next thing to being *your* old friend. Who had a better claim to send for the right doctor, and get the right nurse—when I was not here to cure you with my wonderful Pill? Gently! gently! you mustn’t take hold of my superfine black coat-sleeve in that unceremonious manner.”

He put her hand back on the bed; but she was not to be checked in that way. She persisted in asking another question.—How came Mr. Kirke to know her? She had never seen him; she had never heard of him in her life.

“Very likely,” said Captain Wragge. “But your never having seen *him*, is no reason why he should not have seen *you*.”

“When did he see me?”

The Captain corked up his doses of truth on the spot, without a moment’s hesitation.

“Some time ago, my dear. I can’t exactly say when.”

“Only once?”

Captain Wragge suddenly saw his way to the administration of another dose. “Yes,” he said, “only once.”

She reflected a little. The next question involved the simultaneous expression of two ideas—and the next question cost her an effort.

“He only saw me once,” she said ; “and he only saw me some time ago. How came he to remember me, when he found me here?”

“Aha!” said the captain. “Now you have hit the right nail on the head at last. You can’t possibly be more surprised at his remembering you than I am. A word of advice, my dear. When you are well enough to get up and see Mr. Kirke, try how that sharp question of yours sounds in *his* ears—and insist on his answering it himself.” Slipping out of the dilemma in that characteristically adroit manner, Captain Wragge got briskly on his legs again, and took up his hat.

“Wait!” she pleaded. “I want to ask you——”

“Not another word,” said the captain. “I have given you quite enough to think of for one day. My time is up, and my gig is waiting for me. I am off, to scour the country as usual. I am off, to cultivate the field of public indigestion with the triple ploughshare of aloes, scammony, and gamboge.” He stopped and turned round at the door. “By-the-by, a message from my unfortunate wife. If you will allow her to come and see you again, Mrs. Wragge solemnly promises *not* to lose her shoe next time. *I* don’t believe her. What do you say? May she come?”

“Yes; whenever she likes,” said Magdalen. “If I ever get well again, may poor Mrs. Wragge come and stay with me?”

“Certainly, my dear. If you have no objection, I will provide her, beforehand, with a few thousand impressions in red, blue, and yellow, of her own portrait (‘You might have blown this patient away with a feather, before she took the Pill. Look at her now!’). She is sure to drop herself about perpetually wherever she goes, and the most gratifying results, in an advertising point of view, must inevitably follow. Don’t think me mercenary—I merely understand the age I live in.” He stopped on his way out, for the second time, and turned round once more at the door. “You have been a remarkably good girl,” he said, “and you deserve to be rewarded for it. I’ll give you a last piece of information before I go. Have you heard anybody inquiring after you, for the last day or two, outside your door? Ah, I see you have. A word in your ear, my dear. That’s Mr. Kirke.” He tripped away from the bedside, as briskly as ever. Magdalen heard him advertising himself to the nurse, before he closed the door. “If you are ever asked about it,” he said, in a confidential whisper, “the name is Wragge, and the Pill is to be had in neat boxes, price thirteen pence halfpenny, government stamp included. Take a few copies of the portrait of a female patient, whom you might have blown away with a feather before she took the Pill, and whom you are simply requested to contemplate now. Many thanks. *Good morning.*”

The door closed, and Magdalen was alone again.

She felt no sense of solitude ; Captain Wragge had left her with something new to think of. Hour after hour, her mind dwelt wonderingly on Mr. Kirke, until the evening came, and she heard his voice again, through the half-opened door.

“ I am very grateful,” she said to him, before the nurse could answer his inquiries—“ very, very grateful for all your goodness to me.”

“ Try to get well,” he replied kindly. “ You will more than reward me, if you try to get well.”

The next morning, Mr. Merrick found her impatient to leave her bed, and he moved to the sofa in the front room. The doctor said he supposed she wanted a change. “ Yes,” she replied ; “ I want to see Mr. Kirke.” The doctor consented to move her on the next day, but he positively forbade the additional excitement of seeing anybody, until the day after. She attempted a remonstrance—Mr. Merrick was impenetrable. She tried, when he was gone, to win the nurse by persuasion—the nurse was impenetrable too.

On the next day, they wrapped her in shawls, and carried her in to the sofa, and made her a little bed on it. On the table near at hand, were some flowers and a number of an illustrated newspaper. She immediately asked who had put them there. The nurse (failing to notice a warning look from the doctor) said Mr. Kirke had thought that she might like the flowers, and that the pictures in the paper might amuse her. After that reply, her anxiety to see Mr. Kirke became

too ungovernable to be trifled with. The doctor left the room at once to fetch him.

She looked eagerly at the opening door. Her first glance at him, as he came in, raised a doubt in her mind, whether she now saw that tall figure, and that open sunburnt face for the first time. But she was too weak and too agitated to follow her recollections as far back as Aldborough. She resigned the attempt, and only looked at him. He stopped at the foot of the sofa, and said a few cheering words. She beckoned to him to come nearer, and offered him her wasted hand. He tenderly took it in his, and sat down by her. They were both silent. His face told her of the sorrow and the sympathy which his silence would fain have concealed. She still held his hand—consciously now—as persistently as she had held it on the day when he found her. Her eyes closed, after a vain effort to speak to him, and the tears rolled slowly over her wan white cheeks.

The doctor signed to Kirke, to wait and give her time. She recovered a little and looked at him:—“How kind you have been to me!” she murmured. “And how little I have deserved it!”

“Hush! hush!” he said. “You don’t know what a happiness it was to me to help you.”

The sound of his voice seemed to strengthen her, and to give her courage. She lay looking at him with an eager interest, with a gratitude which artlessly ignored all the conventional restraints that interpose between a woman and a man. “Where did you see

me," she said suddenly, "before you found me here?"

Kirke hesitated. Mr. Merrick came to his assistance.

"I forbid you to say a word about the past, to Mr. Kirke," interposed the doctor; "and I forbid Mr. Kirke to say a word about it to *you*. You are beginning a new life to-day—and the only recollections I sanction, are recollections five minutes old."

She looked at the doctor, and smiled. "I must ask him one question," she said—and turned back again to Kirke. "Is it true that you had only seen me once, before you came to this house?"

"Quite true!" He made the reply with a sudden change of colour which she instantly detected. Her brightening eyes looked at him more earnestly than ever, as she put her next question.

"How came you to remember me, after only seeing me once?"

His hand unconsciously closed on hers, and pressed it for the first time. He attempted to answer, and hesitated at the first word. "I have a good memory," he said at last—and suddenly looked away from her with a confusion so strangely unlike his customary, self-possession of manner, that the doctor and the nurse both noticed it.

Every nerve in her body felt that momentary pressure of his hand, with the exquisite susceptibility, which accompanies the first faltering advance on the way to health. She looked at his changing colour, she listened to his hesitating words, with every sensitive perception

of her sex and age, quickened to seize intuitively on the truth. In the moment when he looked away from her, she gently took her hand from him, and turned her head aside on the pillow. "*Can* it be?" she thought, with a flutter of delicious fear at her heart, with a glow of delicious confusion burning on her cheeks. "*Can* it be?"

The doctor made another sign to Kirke. He understood it, and rose immediately. The momentary discomposure in his face and manner had both disappeared. He was satisfied in his own mind that he had successfully kept his secret, and in the relief of feeling that conviction, he had become himself again.

"Good-bye ; till to-morrow," he said, as he left the room.

"Good-bye," she answered, softly, without looking at him.

Mr. Merrick took the chair which Kirke had resigned, and laid his hand on her pulse. "Just what I feared," remarked the doctor ; "too quick by half."

She petulantly snatched away her wrist. "Don't!" she said, shrinking from him. "Pray don't touch me!"

Mr. Merrick good-humouredly gave up his place to the nurse. "I'll return in half an hour," he whispered ; "and carry her back to bed. Don't let her talk. Show her the pictures in the newspaper, and keep her quiet in that way."

When the doctor returned, the nurse reported that the newspaper had not been wanted. The patient's

conduct had been exemplary. She had not been at all restless, and she had never spoken a word.

The days passed ; and the time grew longer and longer which the doctor allowed her to spend in the front room. She was soon able to dispense with the bed on the sofa—she could be dressed, and could sit up, supported by pillows, in an arm-chair. Her hours of emancipation from the bedroom represented the great daily event of her life. They were the hours she passed in Kirke's society.

She had a double interest in him now—her interest in the man whose protecting care had saved her reason and her life ; her interest in the man whose heart's dearest and deepest secret she had surprised. Little by little, they grew as easy and familiar with each other as old friends ; little by little, she presumed on all her privileges, and wound her way unsuspected into the most intimate knowledge of his nature.

Her questions were endless. Everything that he could tell her of himself and his life, she drew from him delicately and insensibly : he, the least self-conscious of mankind, became an egotist in her dexterous hands. She found out his pride in his ship, and practised on it without remorse. She drew him into talking of the fine qualities of the vessel, of the great things the vessel had done in emergencies, as he had never in his life talked yet to any living creature on shore. She found him out in private seafaring anxieties and unutterable seafaring exultations, which

he had kept a secret from his own mate. She watched his kindling face with a delicious sense of triumph in adding fuel to the fire ; she trapped him into forgetting all considerations of time and place, and striking as hearty a stroke on the rickety little lodging-house table, in the fervour of his talk, as if his hand had descended on the solid bulwark of his ship. His confusion at the discovery of his own forgetfulness, secretly delighted her ; she could have cried with pleasure, when he penitently wondered what he could possibly have been thinking of.

At other times, she drew him from dwelling on the pleasures of his life, and led him into talking of its perils—the perils of that jealous mistress the sea, which had absorbed so much of his existence, which had kept him so strangely innocent and ignorant of the world on shore. Twice he had been shipwrecked. Times innumerable, he and all with him had been threatened with death, and had escaped their doom by the narrowness of a hair's breadth. He was always unwilling at the outset, to speak of this dark and dreadful side of his life : it was only by adroitly tempting him, by laying little snares for him in his talk, that she lured him into telling her of the terrors of the great deep. She sat listening to him with a breathless interest, looking at him with a breathless wonder, as those fearful stories—made doubly vivid by the simple language in which he told them—fell, one by one, from his lips. His noble unconsciousness of his own heroism—the artless modesty with which

he described his own acts of dauntless endurance and devoted courage, without an idea that they were anything more than plain acts of duty to which he was bound by the vocation that he followed—raised him to a place in her estimation so hopelessly high above her, that she became uneasy and impatient until she had pulled down the idol again, which she herself had set up. It was on these occasions that she most rigidly exacted from him all those little familiar attentions so precious to women in their intercourse with men. “This hand,” she thought, with an exquisite delight in secretly following the idea while he was close to her—“this hand that has rescued the drowning from death—is shifting my pillows so tenderly that I hardly know when they are moved. This hand that has seized men mad with mutiny, and driven them back to their duty by main force—is mixing my lemonade and peeling my fruit, more delicately and more neatly than I could do it for myself. Oh, if I could be a man, how I should like to be such a man as this!”

She never allowed her thoughts, while she was in his presence, to lead her beyond that point. It was only when the night had separated them, that she ventured to let her mind dwell on the self-sacrificing devotion which had so mercifully rescued her. Kirke little knew how she thought of him, in the secrecy of her own chamber, during the quiet hours that elapsed before she sunk to sleep. No suspicion crossed his mind of the influence which he was exerting over her—of the new spirit which he was breathing into that

new life, so sensitively open to impression in the first freshness of its recovered sense! "She has nobody else to amuse her, poor thing," he used to think sadly, sitting alone in his small second-floor room. "If a rough fellow like me can beguile the weary hours, till her friends come here, she is heartily welcome to all that I can tell her."

He was out of spirits and restless now, whenever he was by himself. Little by little, he fell into a habit of taking long lonely walks at night, when Magdalen thought he was sleeping upstairs. Once, he went away abruptly in the daytime—on business, as he said. Something had passed between Magdalen and himself the evening before, which had led her into telling him her age. "Twenty, last birthday," he thought. "Take twenty from forty-one. An easy sum in subtraction—as easy a sum as my little nephew could wish for." He walked to the Docks, and looked bitterly at the shipping. "I mustn't forget how a ship is made," he said. "It won't be long before I am back at the old work again." On leaving the Docks, he paid a visit to a brother-sailor—a married man. In the course of conversation, he asked how much older his friend might be than his friend's wife. There was six years' difference between them. "I suppose that's difference enough?" said Kirke. "Yes," said his friend. "Quite enough. Are you looking out for a wife, at last? Try a seasoned woman of thirty-five—that's your mark. Kirke, as near as I can calculate."

The time passed smoothly and quickly—the present time, in which *she* was recovering so happily—the present time, which *he* was beginning to distrust already.

Early one morning, Mr. Merrick surprised Kirke, by a visit in his little room on the second floor.

“I came to the conclusion yesterday,” said the doctor, entering abruptly on his business, “that our patient was strong enough to justify us, at last, in running all risks, and communicating with her friends; and I have accordingly followed the clue which that queer fellow, Captain Wragge, put into our hands. You remember he advised us to apply to Mr. Pendril, the lawyer? I saw Mr. Pendril two days ago, and was referred by him—not over-willingly as I thought—to a lady named Miss Garth. I heard enough from her, to satisfy me that we have exercised a wise caution in acting as we have done. It is a very, very sad story—and I am bound to say that I, for one, make great allowances for the poor girl down stairs. Her only relation in the world is her elder sister. I have suggested that the sister shall write to her in the first instance—and then, if the letter does her no harm, follow it personally in a day or two. I have not given the address, by way of preventing any visits from being paid here, without my permission. All I have done is to undertake to forward the letter; and I shall probably find it at my house when I get back. Can you stop at home until I send my man with it? There is not the least hope of my being able to bring it

myself. All you need do, is to watch for an opportunity when she is not in the front room, and to put the letter where she can see it when she comes in. The handwriting on the address will break the news, before she opens the letter. Say nothing to her about it—take care that the landlady is within call—and leave her to herself. I know I can trust *you* to follow my directions ; and that is why I ask you to do us this service. You look out of spirits this morning. Natural enough. You're used to plenty of fresh air, captain, and you're beginning to pine in this close place."

"May I ask a question, doctor? Is *she* pining in this close place, too? When her sister comes, will her sister take her away?"

"Decidedly—if my advice is followed. She will be well enough to be moved, in a week or less. Good day. You are certainly out of spirits, and your hand feels feverish. Pining for the blue water, captain—pining for the blue water!" With that expression of opinion, the doctor cheerfully went out.

In an hour, the letter arrived. Kirke took it from the landlady reluctantly, and 'almost roughly, without looking at it. Having ascertained that Magdalen was still engaged at her toilet, and having explained to the landlady the necessity of remaining within call, he went down stairs immediately, and put the letter on the table in the front room.

Magdalen heard the sound of the familiar step on the floor. "I shall soon be ready," she called to him through the door.

He made no reply—he took his hat, and went out. After a momentary hesitation, he turned his face eastward, and called on the shipowners who employed him, at their office in Cornhill.

CHAPTER III.

MAGDALEN'S first glance round the empty room, showed her the letter on the table. The address, as the doctor had predicted, broke the news the moment she looked at it.

Not a word escaped her. She sat down by the table, pale and silent, with the letter in her lap. Twice she attempted to open it, and twice she put it back again. The bygone time was not alone in her mind, as she looked at her sister's handwriting—the fear of Kirke was there with it. “My past life!” she thought. “What will he think of me, when he knows my past life?”

She made another effort, and broke the seal. A second letter dropped out of the enclosure, addressed to her in a handwriting with which she was not familiar. She put the second letter aside, and read the lines which Norah had written.

“Ventnor, Isle of Wight, August 24th.

“MY DEAREST MAGDALEN,

“When you read this letter, try to think we have only been parted since yesterday; and dismiss from

your mind (as I have dismissed from mine) the past and all that belongs to it.

“I am strictly forbidden to agitate you, or to weary you by writing a long letter. Is it wrong to tell you that I am the happiest woman living? I hope not, for I can’t keep the secret to myself.

“My darling, prepare yourself for the greatest surprise I have ever caused you. I am married. It is only a week to-day, since I parted with my old name—it is only a week, since I have been the happy wife of George Bartram, of St. Crux.

“There were difficulties at first, in the way of our marriage; some of them, I am afraid, of my making. Happily for me, my husband knew from the beginning, that I really loved him—he gave me a second chance of telling him so, after I had lost the first—and as you see, I was wise enough to take it. You ought to be especially interested, my love, in this marriage; for you are the cause of it. If I had not gone to Aldborough to search for the lost trace of you—if George had not been brought there, at the same time, by circumstances in which you were concerned—my husband and I might never have met. When we look back to our first impressions of each other, we look back to *you*.

“I must keep my promise not to weary you; I must bring this letter (sorely against my will) to an end. Patience! patience!—I shall see you soon. George and I are both coming to London to take you back with us to Ventnor. This is my husband’s invitation,

mind, as well as mine. Don't suppose I married him, Magdalen, until I had taught him to think of you as I think—to wish with my wishes, and to hope with my hopes. I could say so much more about this, so much more about George, if I might only give my thoughts and my pen their own way. But I must leave Miss Garth (at her own special request) a blank space to fill up on the last page of this letter; and I must only add one word more, before I say good-bye—a word to warn you that I have another surprise in store, which I am keeping in reserve until we meet. Don't attempt to guess what it is. You might guess for ages, and be no nearer than you are now to a discovery of the truth.

“Your affectionate sister,

“NORAH BARTRAM.”

(ADDED BY MISS GARTH.)

“MY DEAR CHILD,

“If I had ever lost my old loving recollection of you, I should feel it in my heart again now, when I know that it has pleased God to restore you to us, from the brink of the grave. I add these lines to your sister's letter, because I am not sure that you are quite so fit yet, as she thinks you, to accept her proposal. She has not said a word of her husband, or herself, which is not true. But Mr. Bartram is a stranger to you—and if you think you can recover more easily and more pleasantly to yourself, under the wing of your old governess, than under the protection

of your new brother-in-law, come to me first, and trust to my reconciling Norah to the change of plans. I have secured the refusal of a little cottage at Shanklin—near enough to your sister to allow of your seeing each other whenever you like, and far enough away, at the same time, to secure you the privilege, when you wish it, of being alone. Send me one line, before we meet, to say Yes or No—and I will write to Shanklin by the next post.

“Always yours affectionately,

“HARRIET GARTH.”

The letter dropped from Magdalen’s hand. Thoughts which had never risen in her mind yet, rose in it now.

Norah, whose courage under undeserved calamity, had been the courage of resignation—Norah, who had patiently accepted her hard lot ; who, from first to last, had meditated no vengeance, and stooped to no deceit—Norah had reached the end which all her sister’s ingenuity, all her sister’s resolution, and all her sister’s daring, had failed to achieve. Openly and honourably, with love on one side and love on the other, Norah had married the man who possessed the Combe-Raven money—and Magdalen’s own scheme to recover it, had opened the way to the event which had brought husband and wife together !

As the light of that overwhelming discovery broke on her mind, the old strife was renewed ; and Good and Evil struggled once more which should win her—but with added forces this time ; with the new spirit

that had been breathed into her new life ; with the nobler sense that had grown with the growth of her gratitude to the man who had saved her, fighting on the better side. All the higher impulses of her nature, which had never, from first to last, let her err with impunity—which had tortured her, before her marriage and after it, with the remorse that no woman inherently heartless and inherently wicked can feel—all the nobler elements in her character gathered their forces for the crowning struggle, and strengthened her to meet, with no unworthy shrinking, the revelation that had opened on her view. Clearer and clearer, in the light of its own immortal life, the truth rose before her from the ashes of her dead passions, from the grave of her buried hopes. When she looked at the letter again—when she read the words once more, which told her that the recovery of the lost fortune was her sister's triumph, not hers—she had victoriously trampled down all little jealousies and all mean regrets ; she could say in her heart of hearts, “Norah has deserved it !”

The day wore on. She sat absorbed in her own thoughts, and heedless of the second letter which she had not opened yet, until Kirke's return.

He stopped on the landing outside, and, opening the door a little way only, asked, without entering the room, if she wanted anything that he could send her. She begged him to come in. His face was worn and weary ; he looked older than she had seen him look yet. “Did you put my letter on the table for me ?” she asked.

“Yes. I put it there at the doctor’s request.”

“I suppose the doctor told you it was from my sister? She is coming to see me, and Miss Garth is coming to see me. They will thank you for all your goodness to me, better than I can.”

“I have no claim on their thanks,” he answered sternly. “What I have done, was not done for them, but for you.” He waited a little, and looked at her. His face would have betrayed him, in that look; his voice would have betrayed him, in the next words he spoke—if she had not guessed the truth already. “When your friends come here,” he resumed, “they will take you away, I suppose, to some better place than this?”

“They can take me to no place,” she said gently, “which I shall think of as I think of the place where you found me. They can take me to no dearer friend than the friend who has saved my life.”

There was a moment’s silence between them.

“We have been very happy here,” he went on, in lower and lower tones. “You won’t forget me, when we have said good-bye?”

She turned pale, as the words passed his lips; and, leaving her chair, knelt down at the table, so as to look up into his face, and to force him to look into hers.

“Why do you talk of it?” she asked. “We are not going to say good-bye—at least, not yet.”

“I thought——” he began.

“Yes?”

“I thought your friends were coming here——”

She eagerly interrupted him. "Do you think I would go away with anybody," she said, "even with the dearest relation I have in the world—and leave you here, not knowing and not caring whether I ever saw you again? Oh, you don't think that of me!" she exclaimed, with the passionate tears springing into her eyes—"I'm sure you don't think that of me!"

"No," he said; "I never have thought, I never can think, unjustly or unworthily of you."

Before he could add another word, she left the table as suddenly as she had approached it, and returned to her chair. He had unconsciously replied in terms that reminded her of the hard necessity which still remained unfulfilled—the necessity of telling him the story of the past. Not an idea of concealing that story from his knowledge crossed her mind. "Will he love me, when he knows the truth, as he loves me now?" That was her only thought, as she tried to approach the subject in his presence without shrinking from it.

"Let us put my own feelings out of the question," she said. "There is a reason for my not going away, unless I first have the assurance of seeing you again. You have a claim—the strongest claim of any one—to know how I came here, unknown to my friends, and how it was that you found me fallen so low."

"I make no claim," he said hastily. "I wish to know nothing which it distresses you to tell me."

"You have always done your duty," she rejoined, with a faint smile. "Let me take example from you, if I can, and try to do mine."

"I am old enough to be your father," he said bitterly. "Duty is more easily done at my age than it is at yours."

His age was so constantly in his mind now, that he fancied it must be in her mind too. She had never given it a thought. The reference he had just made to it, did not divert her for a moment from the subject on which she was speaking to him.

"You don't know how I value your good opinion of me," she said, struggling resolutely to sustain her sinking courage. "How can I deserve your kindness, how can I feel that I am worthy of your regard, until I have opened my heart to you? Oh, don't encourage me in my own miserable weakness! Help me to tell the truth—*force* me to tell it, for my own sake, if not for yours!"

He was deeply moved by the fervent sincerity of that appeal.

"You *shall* tell it," he said. "You are right—and I was wrong." He waited a little, and considered. "Would it be easier, to you," he asked, with delicate consideration for her, "to write it than to tell it?"

She caught gratefully at the suggestion. "Far easier," she replied. "I can be sure of myself—I can be sure of hiding nothing from you, if I write it. Don't write to me, on your side!" she added suddenly, seeing, with a woman's instinctive quickness of penetration, the danger of totally renouncing her personal influence over him. "Wait till we meet; and tell me with your own lips, what you think."

“Where shall I tell it?”

“Here!” she said eagerly. “Here, where you found me helpless—here, where you have brought me back to life, and where I have first learnt to know you. I can bear the hardest words you say to me, if you will only say them in this room. It is impossible I can be away longer than a month; a month will be enough, and more than enough. If I come back——” She stopped confusedly. “I am thinking of myself,” she said, “when I ought to be thinking of you. You have your own occupations, and your own friends. Will you decide for us? Will you say how it shall be?”

“It shall be as you wish. If you come back in a month, you will find me here.”

“Will it cause you no sacrifice of your own comfort, and your own plans?”

“It will cause me nothing,” he replied, “but a journey back to the City.” He rose and took his hat. “I must go there at once,” he added, “or I shall not be in time.”

“It is a promise between us?” she said—and held out her hand.

“Yes,” he answered, a little sadly. “It is a promise.”

Slight as it was, the shade of melancholy in his manner pained her. Forgetting all other anxieties in the anxiety to cheer him, she gently pressed the hand he gave her. “If *that* won’t tell him the truth,” she thought, “nothing will.”

It failed to tell him the truth—but it forced a ques-

tion on his mind, which he had not ventured to ask himself before. "Is it her gratitude, or her love, that is speaking to me?" he wondered. "If I was only a younger man, I might almost hope it was her love." That terrible sum in subtraction, which had first presented itself on the day when she told him her age, began to trouble him again, as he left the house. He took twenty from forty-one at intervals, all the way back to the shipowners' office in Cornhill.

Left by herself, Magdalen approached the table, to write the line of answer which Miss Garth requested, and gratefully to accept the proposal that had been made to her.

The second letter, which she had laid aside and forgotten, was the first object that caught her eye, on changing her place. She opened it immediately, and not recognizing the handwriting, looked at the signature. To her unutterable astonishment, her correspondent proved to be no less a person than—old Mr. Clare!

The philosopher's letter dispensed with all the ordinary forms of address, and entered on its subject without prefatory phrases of any kind, in these unpromising terms:—

"I have more news for you of that contemptible cur, my son. Here it is in the fewest possible words.

"I always told you, if you remember, that Frank was a Sneak. The very first trace recovered of him, after

his running away from his employers in China, presents him in that character. Where do you think he turns up next? He turns up, hidden behind a couple of flour barrels, on board an English vessel bound homeward from Hong-Kong to London.

“The name of the ship was *The Deliverance*; and the commander was one Captain Kirke. Instead of acting like a sensible man, and throwing Frank overboard, Captain Kirke was fool enough to listen to his story. He made the most of his misfortunes, you may be sure. He was half starved; he was an Englishman lost in a strange country, without a friend to help him; his only chance of getting home was to sneak into the hold of an English vessel—and he had sneaked in, accordingly, at Hong-Kong, two days since. That was his story. Any other lout in Frank’s situation, would have been rope’s-ended by any other captain. Deserving no pity from anybody—Frank was, as a matter of course, coddled and compassionated on the spot. The captain took him by the hand, the crew pitied him, and the passengers patted him on the back. He was fed, clothed, and presented with his passage home. Luck enough, so far, you will say. Nothing of the sort; nothing like luck enough for my despicable son.

“The ship touched at the Cape of Good Hope. Among his other acts of folly, Captain Kirke took a woman-passenger on board, at that place—not a young woman, by any means—the elderly widow of a

rich colonist. Is it necessary to say that she forthwith became deeply interested in Frank and his misfortunes? Is it necessary to tell you what followed? Look back at my son's career; and you will see that what followed was all of a piece with what went before. He didn't deserve your poor father's interest in him—and he got it. He didn't deserve your attachment—and he got it. He didn't deserve the best place in one of the best offices in London; he didn't deserve an equally good chance in one of the best mercantile houses in China; he didn't deserve food, clothing, pity, and a free passage home—and he got them all. Last, not least, he didn't even deserve to marry a woman old enough to be his grandmother—and he has done it! Not five minutes since, I sent his wedding-cards out to the dust-hole, and tossed the letter that came with them into the fire. The last piece of information which that letter contains is, that he and his wife are looking out for a house and estate to suit them. Mark my words! Frank will get one of the best estates in England; a seat in the House of Commons will follow as a matter of course; and one of the legislators of this Ass-ridden country will be——
MY LOUT!

“If you are the sensible girl I have always taken you for, you have long since learnt to rate Frank at his true value, and the news I send you will only confirm your contempt for him. I wish your poor father could but have lived to see this day! Often as I have missed my old gossip, I don't know that I ever felt

the loss of him so keenly, as I felt it when Frank's wedding-cards and Frank's letter came to this house.

“Your friend, if you ever want one,

“FRANCIS CLARE, Sen.”

With one momentary disturbance of her composure, produced by the appearance of Kirke's name in Mr. Clare's singular narrative, Magdalen read the letter steadily through from beginning to end. The time when it could have distressed her, was gone by; the scales had long since fallen from her eyes. Mr. Clare himself would have been satisfied, if he had seen the quiet contempt on her face as she laid aside his letter. The only serious thought it cost her, was a thought in which Kirke was concerned. The careless manner in which he had referred, in her presence, to the passengers on board his ship, without mentioning any of them by their names, showed her that Frank must have kept silence on the subject of the engagement once existing between them. The confession of that vanished delusion was left for her to make—as part of the story of the past which she had pledged herself unreservedly to reveal.

She wrote to Miss Garth, and sent the letter to the post immediately.

The next morning brought a line of rejoinder. Miss Garth had written to secure the cottage at Shanklin, and Mr. Merrick had consented to Magdalen's removal on the following day. Norah would be the first to arrive at the house; and Miss Garth would follow,

with a comfortable carriage to take the invalid to the railway. Every needful arrangement had been made for her : the effort of moving was the one effort she would have to make.

Magdalen read the letter thankfully — but her thoughts wandered from it, and followed Kirke on his return to the City. What was the business which had once already taken him there in the morning? And why had the promise exchanged between them, obliged him to go to the City again, for the second time in one day?

Was it, by any chance, business relating to the sea? Were his employers tempting him to go back to his ship?

CHAPTER IV.

THE first agitation of the meeting between the sisters was over; the first vivid impressions, half pleasurable, half painful, had softened a little—and Norah and Magdalen sat together, hand in hand; each rapt in the silent fulness of her own joy.

Magdalen was the first to speak.

“You have something to tell me, Norah?”

“I have a thousand things to tell you, my love; and you have ten thousand things to tell me.—Do you mean that second surprise, which I told you of in my letter?”

“Yes. I suppose it must concern me very nearly—or you would hardly have thought of mentioning it in your first letter?”

“It does concern you very nearly. You have heard of George’s house in Essex? You must be familiar, at least, with the name of St. Crux?—What is there to start at, my dear? I am afraid you are hardly strong enough for any more surprises just yet?”

“Quite strong enough, Norah. I have something to say to you about St. Crux—I have a surprise, on my side, for *you*.”

“Will you tell it me now?”

“Not now. You shall know it when we are at the sea-side—you shall know it, before I accept the kindness which has invited me to your husband’s house.”

“What *can* it be? Why not tell me at once?”

“You used often to set me the example of patience, Norah, in old times—will you set me the example now?”

“With all my heart. Shall I return to my own story as well? Yes? Then we will go back to it at once. I was telling you that St. Crux is George’s house, in Essex; the house he inherited from his uncle. Knowing that Miss Garth had a curiosity to see the place, he left word (when he went abroad after the admiral’s death) that she and any friends who came with her, were to be admitted, if she happened to find herself in the neighbourhood during his absence. Miss Garth and I, and a large party of Mr. Tyrrel’s friends, found ourselves in the neighbourhood, not long after George’s departure. We had all been invited to see the launch of Mr. Tyrrel’s new yacht, from the builder’s yard at Wivenhoe in Essex. When the launch was over, the rest of the company returned to Colchester to dine. Miss Garth and I contrived to get into the same carriage together, with nobody but my two little pupils for our companions. We gave the coachman his orders, and drove round by St. Crux. The moment Miss Garth mentioned her name, we were let in, and shown all over the house. I don’t know how to describe it to you: it is the most bewildering place I ever saw in my life——”

“Don’t attempt to describe it, Norah. Go on with your story instead.”

“Very well. My story takes me straight into one of the rooms at St. Crux—a room about as long as your street here ; so dreary, so dirty, and so dreadfully cold, that I shiver at the bare recollection of it. Miss Garth was for getting out of it again, as speedily as possible, and so was I. But the housekeeper declined to let us off without first looking at a singular piece of furniture, the only piece of furniture in the comfortless place. She called it a tripod, I think. (There is nothing to be alarmed at, Magdalen ; I assure you there is nothing to be alarmed at!) At any rate, it was a strange three-legged thing, which supported a great pan full of charcoal ashes at the top. It was considered, by all good judges (the housekeeper told us), a wonderful piece of chasing in metal ; and she especially pointed out the beauty of some scroll-work running round the inside of the pan, with Latin mottoes on it, signifying—I forget what. I felt not the slightest interest in the thing myself, but I looked close at the scroll-work to satisfy the housekeeper. To confess the truth, she was rather tiresome with her mechanically-learnt lecture on fine metal-work—and, while she was talking, I found myself idly stirring the soft feathery white ashes backwards and forwards with my hand, pretending to listen, with my mind a hundred miles away from her. I don’t know how long or how short a time I had been playing with the ashes, when my fingers suddenly encountered a piece of crumpled

paper, hidden deep among them. When I brought it to the surface, it proved to be a letter—a long letter full of cramped, close writing.—You have anticipated my story, Magdalen, before I can end it! You know as well as I do, that the letter which my idle fingers found, was the Secret Trust. Hold out your hand, my dear. I have got George's permission to show it to you,—and there it is!"

She put the Trust into her sister's hand. Magdalen took it from her mechanically. "You!" she said, looking at her sister with the remembrance of all that she had vainly ventured, of all that she had vainly suffered, at St. Crux. "*You* have found it!"

"Yes," said Norah, gaily; "the Trust has proved no exception to the general perversity of all lost things. Look for them, and they remain invisible. Leave them alone, and they reveal themselves! You and your lawyer, Magdalen, were both justified in supposing that your interest in this discovery was an interest of no common kind. I spare you all our consultations after I had produced the crumpled paper from the ashes. It ended in George's lawyer being written to, and in George himself being recalled from the Continent. Miss Garth and I both saw him, immediately on his return; he did, what neither of us could do—he solved the mystery of the Trust being hidden in the charcoal ashes. Admiral Bartram, you must know, was all his life subject to fits of somnambulism. He had been found walking in his sleep, not long before his death—just at the time, too,

when he was sadly troubled in his mind on the subject of that very letter in your hand. George's idea is that he must have fancied he was doing, in his sleep, what he would have died rather than do in his waking moments—destroying the Trust. The fire had been lit in the pan not long before, and he no doubt saw it still burning in his dream. This was George's explanation of the strange position of the letter when I discovered it. The question of what was to be done with the letter itself, came next, and was no easy question for a woman to understand. But I determined to master it, and I did master it, because it related to you."

"Let me try to master it, in my turn," said Magdalen. "I have a particular reason for wishing to know as much about this letter, as you know yourself. What has it done for others? and what is it to do for me?"

"My dear Magdalen, how strangely you look at it! how strangely you talk of it! Worthless as it may appear, that morsel of paper gives you a fortune."

"Is my only claim to the fortune, the claim which this letter gives me?"

"Yes—the letter is your only claim. Shall I try if I can explain it, in two words? Taken by itself, the letter might, in the lawyer's opinion, have been made a matter for dispute—though I am sure George would have sanctioned no proceeding of that sort. Taken, however, with the postscript which Admiral Bartram attached to it (you will see the lines, if you look under the signature on the third page), it becomes legally

binding, as well as morally binding, on the Admiral's representatives. I have exhausted my small stock of legal words, and must go on in my own language, instead of in the lawyer's. The end of the thing was simply this. All the money went back to Mr. Noel Vanstone's estate (another legal word ! my vocabulary is richer than I thought), for one plain reason—that it had not been employed as Mr. Noel Vanstone directed. If Mrs. Girdlestone had lived, or if George had married me a few months earlier, results would have been just the other way. As it is, half the money has been already divided between Mr. Noel Vanstone's next of kin ; which means, translated into plain English, my husband, and his poor bedridden sister—who took the money formally, one day, to satisfy the lawyer, and who gave it back again generously, the next, to satisfy herself. So much for one half of this legacy. The other half, my dear, is all yours. How strangely events happen, Magdalen ! It is only two years since you and I were left disinherited orphans—and we are sharing our poor father's fortune between us, after all !”

“Wait a little, Norah. Our shares come to us in very different ways.”

“Do they ? Mine comes to me, by my husband. Yours comes to you——” she stopped confusedly, and changed colour. “Forgive me, my own love !” she said, putting Magdalen's hand to her lips. “I have forgotten what I ought to have remembered. I have thoughtlessly distressed you !”

“No !” said Magdalen. “You have encouraged me.”

“Encouraged you?”

“You shall see.”

With those words, she rose quietly from the sofa, and walked to the open window. Before Norah could follow her, she had torn the Trust to pieces, and had cast the fragments into the street.

She came back to the sofa, and laid her head, with a deep sigh of relief, on Norah’s bosom. “I will owe nothing to my past life,” she said. “I have parted with it, as I have parted with those torn morsels of paper. All the thoughts, and all the hopes belonging to it, are put away from me for ever!”

“Magdalen! my husband will never allow you; I will never allow you, myself——”

“Hush! hush! What your husband thinks right, Norah, you and I will think right, too. I will take from *you*, what I would never have taken, if that letter had given it to me. The end I dreamed of has come. Nothing is changed, but the position I once thought we might hold towards each other. Better as it is, my love—far, far better as it is!”

So, she made the last sacrifice of the old perversity and the old pride. So, she entered on the new and nobler life.

* * * *

A month had passed. The autumn sunshine was bright, even in the murky streets; and the clocks in the neighbourhood were just striking two, as Magdalen returned alone to the house in Aaron’s Buildings.

“Is he waiting for me?” she asked, anxiously, when the landlady let her in.

He was waiting in the front room. Magdalen stole up the stairs, and knocked at the door. He called to her carelessly and absently to come in—plainly thinking that it was only the servant who applied for permission to enter the room.

“You hardly expected me so soon?” she said, speaking on the threshold, and pausing there to enjoy his surprise as he started to his feet and looked at her.

The only traces of illness still visible in her face, left a delicacy in its outline which added refinement to her beauty. She was simply dressed in muslin. Her plain straw bonnet had no other ornament than the white ribbon with which it was sparingly trimmed. She had never looked lovelier in her best days, than she looked now—as she advanced to the table at which he had been sitting, with a little basket of flowers that she had brought with her from the country, and offered him her hand.

He looked anxious and careworn, when she saw him closer. She interrupted his first inquiries and congratulations, to ask if he had remained in London, since they had parted—if he had not even gone away for a few days only, to see his friends in Suffolk? No; he had been in London ever since. He never told her that the pretty parsonage-house in Suffolk wanted all those associations with herself, in which the poor four walls at Aaron’s Buildings were so rich. He only said, he had been in London ever since.

"I wonder," she asked, looking him attentively in the face, "if you are as happy to see me again, as I am to see you?"

"Perhaps, I am even happier, in my different way," he answered, with a smile.

She took off her bonnet and scarf, and seated herself once more in her own arm-chair. "I suppose this street is very ugly," she said; "and I am sure nobody can deny that the house is very small. And yet—and yet, it feels like coming home again. Sit there, where you used to sit, tell me about yourself. I want to know all that you have done, all that you have thought even, while I have been away." She tried to resume the endless succession of questions by means of which she was accustomed to lure him into speaking of himself. But she put them far less spontaneously, far less adroitly than usual. Her one all-absorbing anxiety in entering that room, was not an anxiety to be trifled with. After a quarter of an hour wasted in constrained inquiries on one side, in reluctant replies on the other, she ventured near the dangerous subject at last.

"Have you received the letters I wrote to you from the sea-side?" she asked, suddenly looking away from him for the first time.

"Yes," he said, "all."

"Have you read them?"

"Every one of them; many times over."

Her heart beat as if it would suffocate her. She had kept her promise bravely. The whole story of

her life, from the time of the home-wreck at Combe-Raven, to the time when she had destroyed the Secret Trust in her sister's presence, had been all laid before him. Nothing that she had done, nothing even that she had thought, had been concealed from his knowledge. As he would have kept a pledged engagement with her, so she had kept her pledged engagement with him. She had not faltered in the resolution to do this—and now she faltered over the one decisive question which she had come there to ask. Strong as the desire in her was to know if she had lost or won him, the fear of knowing was at that moment stronger still. She waited and trembled : she waited, and said no more.

“May I speak to you about your letters?” he asked. “May I tell you——?”

If she had looked at him, as he said those few words, she would have seen what he thought of her, in his face. She would have seen, innocent as he was in this world's knowledge, that he knew the priceless value, the all-ennobling virtue, of a woman who speaks the truth. But she had no courage to look at him—no courage to raise her eyes from her lap.

“Not just yet,” she said, faintly. “Not quite so soon after we have met again.”

She rose hurriedly from her chair, and walked to the window—turned back again into the room—and approached the table, close to where he was sitting. The writing materials scattered near him, offered her a pretext for changing the subject ; and she seized on it

directly. "Were you writing a letter," she asked, "when I came in?"

"I was thinking about it," he replied. "It was not a letter to be written, without thinking first." He rose, as he answered her, to gather the writing materials together, and put them away.

"Why should I interrupt you?" she said. "Why not let me try whether I can't help you, instead? Is it a secret?"

"No—not a secret."

He hesitated as he answered her. She instantly guessed the truth.

"Is it about your ship?"

He little knew how she had been thinking in her absence from him, of the business which he believed that he had concealed from her. He little knew that she had learnt already to be jealous of his ship.

"Do they want you to return to your old life?" she went on. "Do they want you to go back to the sea? Must you say Yes or No at once?"

"At once."

"If I had not come in when I did, would you have said Yes?"

She unconsciously laid her hand on his arm; forgetting all inferior considerations in her breathless anxiety to hear his next words. The confession of his love, was within a hair's breadth of escaping him—but he checked the utterance of it even yet. "I don't care for myself," he thought. "But how can I be certain of not distressing *her*?"

“Would you have said Yes?” she repeated.

“I was doubting,” he answered—“I was doubting between Yes and No.”

Her hand tightened on his arm; a sudden trembling seized her in every limb—she could bear it no longer. All her heart went out to him, in her next words.

“Were you doubting *for my sake*?”

“Yes,” he said. “Take my confession in return for yours—I was doubting for your sake.”

She said no more—she only looked at him. In that look, the truth reached him at last. The next instant, she was folded in his arms, and was shedding delicious tears of joy, with her face hidden on his bosom.

“Do I deserve my happiness?” she murmured, asking the one question at last. “Oh, I know how the poor narrow people who have never felt and never suffered, would answer me, if I asked them what I ask you. If *they* knew my story, they would forget all the provocation, and only remember the offence—they would fasten on my sin, and pass all my suffering by. But you are not one of them? Tell me if you have any shadow of a misgiving! Tell me if you doubt that the one dear object of all my life to come, is to live worthy of you! I asked you to wait and see me; I asked you, if there was any hard truth to be told, to tell it me here, with your own lips. Tell it, my love, my husband!—tell it me now!”

She looked up, still clinging to him as she clung to the hope of her better life to come.

“Tell me the truth!” she repeated.

“With my own lips?”

“Yes!” she answered eagerly. “Say what you think of me, with your own lips.”

He stooped, and kissed her.

THE END.

